

West Texas Rider

G.L. SNODGRASS

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By

G.L. Snodgrass

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Dedicated to
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West Texas Rider

Chapter One

West Texas 1871

By ignoring her uncle and coming anyway, had she risked herself and her sibling's lives? Had she made a mistake? Really, what other question was there to ask?

As the stagecoach rocked, Mary Rose McCain squeezed her hands in her lap and tried to calm the bubbling worry deep in her stomach. "Don't come," his letter had said. "Not yet, perhaps next year."

She still remembered the shock and fear that had washed over her at reading her uncle's words. He had been her only hope of escape. Her only choice. His refusal of help had hit her like a locomotive, leaving her with no choice but to come anyway.

Mary sighed to herself as she glanced at her brother next to her on the stagecoach rear-facing seat. Thomas Carter McCain, his head buried in a book as always. She almost smiled to herself. Even after two days on a train and three days on the stage, the twelve-year-old boy found the insides of a book more interesting than the country around them.

Soft brown hair, with the beginnings of what would be wide shoulders, like their father, he would become handsome when fully grown. Hopefully, it would be the only thing he inherited from the man.

Next to him, little Amelia Alison McCain, Amy, so different from her older brother. Blond hair in pigtails. At eight, she was enamored with everything new and different. The men on the stage, the horses, the wild country. Her eyes danced as she took it all in, memorizing every detail.

Mary Rose glanced over at the only other passenger. A Mr. Burwell. A slight, older man dressed in black broadcloth his chin rested on his narrow chest, his head bobbing with each bounce of the stage. He was on his way to El Paso to open a barbershop and dentistry.

A quick sense of gratefulness filled her. Only one other passenger and he was harmless. So different from most of the men she had seen out here in this wild land.

Shaking her head, Mary Rose pulled back the curtain to look out. So different than the green farmland of Ohio. Dryer, with flat scrubland disappearing into a distant haze. More sand than bush. A

true desert.

A distant hawk circled. The air tasted of dust and heat. And it was not yet summer, she could easily imagine the sweltering hot temperatures a few months hence.

Why had her uncle ever chosen such a lonely country? What was it about men that made them push out beyond other people? Out into such inhospitable places.

West Texas, the land of legends, she thought with a small smile. A world without rules, she reminded herself. They'd changed stages in Fort Chadbourne, a hundred miles earlier. Since then, it had been desolate stage stations every twenty miles or so. Strategically located near the slightest bit of water. Only four more stations until they reached their destination at Fort Stockton, Fifty miles beyond the Pecos River.

"We should be there soon," she said to Thomas and Amy. "The next station."

The boy looked up for a brief second, nodded, "Llano Estacada."

"What does that mean?" Amy asked.

"The Staked Plains," Thomas answered without looking up from his book. "This area is surrounded on three sides by steep mountains. Like a fort. A palisade."

"How do you know?" Amy asked, as always, hating it when her older brother acted as if he were smarter than her.

"I asked," he said, "At the stop at the station on the Concho."

The little girl frowned for a moment, then turned to stare out the window, trying to pretend it wasn't important that he knew things she didn't.

"I don't see any mountains," Amy said. "And this doesn't look like the plains we saw in Kansas."

From across from them, Mr. Burwell snorted. "When the boy says area, he is talking hundreds of miles," the man said without opening his eyes. "And they call it plains because it is flat. But it's more desert than grassland."

Thomas looked up at the man, but his expression didn't change. Instead, he returned to reading.

Mary could only let out a long breath. Her brother had never said anything, but she knew he was angry with her. At twelve years old, he didn't understand why she had torn them away from their home. Why they had snuck away in the middle of the night.

How could she ever explain it to him? The debts their father had left them. The attention of a certain Brandon Brooks. Her skin crawled

as she fought to shake away the bile that rose in her throat every time she thought of the man.

Grinding her teeth, she thought back to that last moment. He had told her that if she were but to marry him, her father's debts would be forgiven. In addition, he would see to her brother's care and education. A more than fine offer.

She knew a dozen women who would have jumped at the chance. Brandon was handsome, rich, well-spoken, and respected.

But they hadn't seen the things she had seen. The bruises on his maid's face. The beating of his dog. She absently rubbed her arm, even after five days it still hurt. While she had always suspected. It was at the moment he had grabbed her that she had known. It was the evil glint in his eye. As if he was anticipating the pain and misery, he was going to cause her.

It had taken every bit of control not to scream. But she had instinctively known that it was exactly what he wanted. Instead, she had smiled and nodded. Accepting his proposal. Delay, it was her only recourse.

For the briefest second, she had seen what might have been disappointment. As if he had wanted her to resist. But he had gathered himself quickly and nodded, laying out when and where they would be married. Who would be invited? Who would not?

Mary had simply smiled, nodded, all the while knowing she must get away from this man forever. She, Amy, and Thomas would never be safe until Brandon Brooks had what he wanted.

She shuddered. Brandon was an evil man. She was as sure of it as she was anything in this life. No, this was to be their new start. He would never learn where they had gone. Maybe he might discover she had bought a train ticket for herself and her siblings. But he wouldn't know where they had gotten off the train. Wouldn't know which stage they had taken. And most definitely have no knowledge of her uncle's ranch in west Texas.

If her plan worked, they would have disappeared into the west. Two more people in amongst countless others to walk away from their past and start over.

The stage leaned to the left suddenly then bounced back into position. Mary ground her teeth; would this trip ever end?

Finally, though, the stage driver yelled at the horses, and she felt the stage begin to slow. They must have reached the next station she realized. Sending up a silent prayer of thanks, she reached back to make sure her hair was in place and waited for the stage to come to a complete stop.

The coach's door was opened by a heavy man with a full mustache.

"Benavides," he said as he held out a hand to help her down. "Welcome, we have food inside. The stage it not leave for an hour. You have time to shake out the kinks. My misses has a good noon meal for you, and the facilities are behind the station and to the right."

Mary sighed, after two days she well knew the routine. As she stepped out of the stage, she examined her surroundings. A stone building with the kitchen located outside under the shade of the only tree within sight. A heavyset Mexican woman was bent over a large pot, stirring something with a wooden spoon.

Next to the building a stone corral with a dozen horses milling about. A wooden shed on the far side.

Amy immediately ran to the corral, climbing a bit so she could see over the top and look at the horses. Thomas had finally closed his book and was slowly taking in the surroundings.

"Your meals will be ready in about fifteen minutes, the stage, it is early," the station master said before turning and going into the building.

Mary nodded; it would be good to stretch her legs like the man suggested. She thought about walking over and seeing what the woman was cooking but decided it was best she not. The last thing the woman would want was some stranger poking her nose into things.

Instead, she stepped aside and watched a stable boy lead the horse team to the corral then remove their harnesses and let them loose. The horses immediately began to roll in the dust.

The driver, guard, and Mr. Pierce followed the station master into the building, obviously wanting to get out of the sun. But she had been cooped up too long. She would stay outside as long as she could.

The air was dry, dusty, without a hint of a breeze. The hot sun baked down, making her exposed skin feel as if the moisture was being pulled directly out of it. Again, she wondered how hot it would get in the dead of summer.

A lonely place, she thought to herself. Twenty miles from the nearest neighbor. Another stage station at that. Such a harsh desolate land, she thought to herself with an internal shudder, again wondering why her uncle would ever settle out here.

Putting her hands behind her back, she pushed, trying to eliminate a crick that threatened to become a pain.

A distant movement caught her eye. Someone coming towards

them from the Northwest. Why? There was nothing that way until you got to Denver, a thousand miles away.

Lifting her hand to shield her eyes, she watched as the figure grew closer. A man walking in out of the desert. A western man, not an Indian, she thought with relief. Tall, lean, with wide shoulders.

Her heart skipped for some reason as she watched him approach. His long stride eating up ground. He held a rifle in one hand, saddlebags were thrown across his shoulder. Two pistols, one on each hip. Not a tame man, she thought to herself. Like most of the men out here, he would be partly wild.

As he came closer, her thoughts were confirmed when she saw him clearly. Caked in dust, sweat rivulets had worn paths down a hard, tanned face in need of a shave.

Where had he come from? Why would a man be walking all alone out of the desert?

She was about to turn to the house when their eyes locked, she froze, unable to move. Forged steel was her first thought. A piercing gray. The kind of eyes that could fix a person in place with a simple look.

Both Amy and Thomas had stopped to stare.

The man marched to the water trough, dropped his gray hat in the dust, and sank to his knees before he dipped his head into the trough, keeping it there for almost half a minute. Finally, he came up for air, shaking his head to free it of water.

Thick brown hair cut short.

She could only stand there slack-jawed as he rose, again reminding her of just how tall he was. A mountain lion. That was her first thought. The way he moved. The knowing glare in his eyes. Lean, and dangerous.

As he walked past her, he tipped his hat and said, "Ma'am."

Mary could only stare in disbelief as he stepped into the station. Both Thomas and Amy looked at her in questioning shock then raced past her into the station after the man.

She lifted her skirts and hurried after them. This was a story she had to hear.

Chapter Two

Mary pushed through the station door just in time to see the strange man drop his rifle and saddlebags onto the bar at the far end of the room.

Everyone in the station was looking at the man in surprise. Both the driver and guard were sitting at a wooden table. Mr. Pierce at another. In the far corner. Two other men that had not been on the stage were frowning at the tall stranger.

Were they here to catch the next stage? Or were they waiting for another one in the opposite direction? Or perhaps just passing cowboys looking for a meal.

Both men glanced at her, their eyebrows rising the way a man's did when he saw a new woman. Evaluating, categorizing, and calculating.

Ignoring them, she turned to watch the tall stranger. His wide shoulders seemed to take up half the room. In his mid-twenties. Short brown hair. He wore store-bought clothes. A blue cotton shirt with pearl buttons at the cuffs. And denim pants. Worn, but well made.

His boots were hand tooled and down at the heel. But that might be the result of walking across a rocky desert.

A man who could afford good clothes, she realized. Not expensive. But good. But by the sight of his rough hands and the way his muscles worked across his back, the kind of man who wasn't afraid of hard work.

Both Amy and Thomas stood next to her, no one saying anything, each waiting.

"Whiskey," the man said to the station master. "Then some water."

The station master nodded as he grabbed an earthen jug from beneath the bar and quickly filled a glass with amber liquid. Followed by a tall glass of water.

The tall cowboy threw the whiskey back then sighed heavily. "Again."

Mary noticed the rear door open and the Mexican woman come in and whisper in the station master's ear. The man's eyebrows rose as he quickly looked at his customer.

"Don't get many walk-up customers," the station master joked as he filled the glass.

The stranger paused for a second then said, "Was tracking a man. He killed my horse to stop me getting him."

“You the law?” one of the other cowboys called from the corner.

The tall stranger turned and examined him for a moment then shook his head. “Used to be, But I ain’t now.”

A silence fell over the room. Mary so wanted to ask a dozen different questions but forced herself to keep quiet. This was not the kind of place that easily accepted a woman butting into what these men would consider male territory.

“Who’s this man you after?” the station master asked.

The tall stranger paused. “A big man, has a nasty scar.” Here he drew a line from the bottom of his ear to his chin. “Went by the name of Jimmy Burke up in the Oregon territory. Black hair, stocky. Thick as an oak tree,”

The station master shook his head. “Ain’t seen a man like that around here. Mr. ...?”

“Parker, Jake Parker,” the tall stranger said before taking a long drink of water.

The station master’s eyes opened wide. “You the one that helped clean up Silver Creek, maybe five years ago. Northern Nevada? I used to work the Comstock in Virginia City, heard of you.”

Mr. Parker nodded. “I was there for a bit of it.”

Mary Rose was a woman alone. She had learned long ago to be observant and to notice the small things. She watched as the cowboys in the corner lifted both of their hands and slowly place them flat on the table. Away from their guns, she realized. What was it about this man that made them nervous?

“Why you after this man?” the second cowboy asked.

“He killed a friend of mine. I’d like to discuss the matter with him,” Mr. Parker answered with a cold stare that sent a shiver down Mary’s spine. She wouldn’t want to be the man who had angered this stranger. Things would not go well.

“Where’d he put you afoot?” The station master asked.

Parker looked off into the distance. “Must have been about halfway between here and Big Spring.”

The stage driver whistled. “That’d be a good twenty-five miles. That’s a hefty walk. Ain’t no water between here and there.”

Mr. Parker nodded, “Closer to thirty I’d say.”

Mary felt her stomach tighten. What must it have been like to be trapped out there all alone? No water, and a blazing sun.

The tall stranger turned to the stage driver and shotgun guard. “Just so you know, I came across some Comanche sign about ten miles

north. They were headed Southwest, probably on a raid into Mexico.

A charge of worry filled the room as people looked at each other.

“You sure?” the driver asked.

Mr. Parker shrugged. “Twenty unshod ponies. Moccasin tracks. Headed to Mexico. What would you suggest? It sure weren’t a gaggle of Mormon’s going to Sunday meeting.”

Mary noticed the driver shoot his guard a quick look that spoke about his worry. He then said, “Well, they should be well past us before we get to Fort Stockton.”

Mr. Parker studied him for a long moment then shook his head slightly. “I don’t know if these Texas Indians is much different than the Shoshone and Yakima we got at home. But I learned early. Never think you know what an Indian is going to do. As soon as you think you got it figured out. They got the darnedest habit of proving you wrong.”

A cold fear filled Mary as she unknowingly reached out to touch both Thomas and Amy. Was this man correct? Need they fear an Indian attack? Yes, she knew the stories. She had known it was a risk. But she had been told that no Indians had successfully stopped a stage on this part of the line.

But there always was a first time, she reminded herself with a shiver.

The news of Indians in the area seemed to put a pall over the room as people retreated to their own internal thoughts. The Mexican woman brought in a large pot of beans, a platter of meat, and dozens of flat tortillas.

Within minutes everyone was busy filling their stomachs. But Mary kept an eye on the tall stranger. Who was he? What kind of man tracked another all the way down from Oregon.?

Without being obvious, she examined him again. He looked competent, she realized. Obviously intelligent, and if the indications of the other men were any indication, dangerous. From the corner of her eye, she noticed both Thomas and Amy giving the man surreptitious looks.

She wondered what they were thinking. Like herself, she was sure they had a dozen questions, but being the big sister meant you had to pretend that you knew everything already. So, she concentrated on her food without being obvious about her curiosity.

When the stranger had finished two plates of beans and a dozen tortillas, he pushed back and said, “Need to buy a horse and the loan of a saddle so I can go get mine. I didn’t think it was smart to haul it

on my shoulder across that land.”

The station master frowned as he shook his head. “Can’t sell you a horse. They belong to the line, not me, and I got strict orders.”

The man took a deep breath then nodded before he turned to the stage driver. “You got room? I’ll pay my way. I’ll get a horse at Fort Stockton or one of the stations between here and there.”

“Seems like a long way to go just to retrieve a saddle,” the younger cowboy in the corner said.

The stranger shrugged, “Liked that saddle, took me two years to break it in. Besides, I got a man to find. And that was where I lost his trail.”

A cold shiver ran down Mary’s back as she realized this man was going to risk the desert and the Indians just to find the man he was after. Again, she wondered who was he?

Jake Parker pushed down the burning anger inside of him. For five weeks, he'd tracked Burke. He'd thought he finally had him at the Big Spring buffalo hunter's camp. But the man had left hours before he got there.

Swallowing a curse, Jake could only shake his head, the man was slippery than a sidewinder and just as mean. Twice before, he'd almost caught up with him. Once at Elko, then Durango, and again at Santa Fe. But both times, the man had gotten away.

If he hadn't known better, Jake would have sworn the bastard had a guardian angel to warn him. But a man like Jim Burke wouldn't have been on good terms with no angels.

Very well, he thought to himself as he closed his eyes and tried to map out the territory. This was a setback. But he knew he'd get the man eventually. Either that or die trying.

"Excuse me," A soft feminine voice said from behind him. He turned to see the woman who he'd passed coming in. Speaking of angels, he thought. His gut tightened. He'd rekindled his strength enough to notice what was important. Hair the color of a setting sun, eyes bluer than Lake Shasta, and skin as soft as a summer breeze.

Pretty in that innocent look that pulled at a man and pushed him into thoughts, he shouldn't be having. Thoughts about a home and waking up next to a pretty woman he could call his.

Next to her were two young 'uns. Obviously too old to be hers. Brother and sisters, he would reckon.

"Yes Ma'am," he said as he stood up. One thing his sister Hannah had pounded into his hard head was manners.

She smiled softly. "I thought I would introduce ourselves. It seems that we will be spending a long time together on the stage. I am Mary Rose McCain, and this is my brother Thomas and my sister Amelia."

"Amy," the little girl said with a hesitant smile.

The boy studied him with shrewd eyes as if he was evaluating him. For some reason, he reminded Jake of his brother Luke. Still waters run deep.

"Ma'am," he said to the little girl as he dipped his head. Then turning to the older girl, he said, "Jacob Parker, But most call me Jake. Pleased to meet you. I will try to not crowd you too much on the stage."

Her pretty cheeks blushed for some unknown reason.

Suddenly, he frowned as he looked around the station then back

down at her. "You are traveling alone? Your husband isn't with you."

Again, her cheeks blushed. "I am not married. We are on our way to our uncle's ranch just outside of Fort Stockton. Benjamin Fulton. Perhaps you know of it?"

He shook his head. "No Ma'am, but I ain't ... haven't been to that part of the country yet."

She nodded and for the briefest moment he thought he might have seen a hint of worry behind her eyes. "Yes, well. If you are in need of a horse, I am sure my uncle will be able to sell you one."

"Thank you, ma'am."

An awkward silence fell over them as he looked down at her. The kind of silence that seemed to drag on forever but that neither of them could break. Thankfully her brother had the good sense to cough into his hand.

She seemed to pull herself together, gave him a quick smile, then gently guided her two siblings out of the station.

Jake could only look after her and wonder. A woman like that reminded a man of the things he didn't have in this world.

Chapter Three

Jake pulled his hat down over his eyes, folded his arms, and leaned into the corner of the stage as it rocked over a bump. If he was lucky, he'd grab a couple of winks. Of course, having a pretty woman sitting across from a man could make that difficult.

He glanced over at her and caught her staring at him with a strange look. Her cheeks flushed red as she quickly looked away.

Stifling a chuckle, he closed his eyes. The woman was probably wondering who this strange beast across from her might be and how dare the stage line allow him within twenty feet of her and her family.

"Mr. Parker," the little sister, Amy, said. "Is it true? About the Indians?"

"Shush Amy," Her older sister said as she reached out to touch her arm. "Let the man rest."

Jake couldn't help but smile down at the little girl. "Is what true?"

"That they are on a raid. I heard one of the cowboys talking about the War trail."

He quickly glanced over at the older sister to see how truthful he should be. These were easterners. They hadn't grown up in this world. When he saw the curiosity in her eyes, he shrugged.

"More than likely," he told the little girl. "But don't be thinking of it as war, to them, raids is just business. Just like your Scottish ancestors on the border of England a hundred years ago.

"They take a bunch of horses down in Mexico, drive them up to Kansas, or Missouri trade them. One of their favorite trails is just a few miles west of here. That was what I come across. They have been doing it for years."

"Are they as dangerous as people say?" the boy asked, his closed book on his lap?

The other male passenger scoffed. Pierce, "The Army will stop them."

Jake again shrugged. "The Comanche empire stretches from Mexico to Kansas. And if'n they are anything like the Shoshone up north, they ain't too happy with strangers coming onto their land. And every time we sign an agreement, they see us break it a few years later. I wouldn't be counting on the army to keep the peace."

The woman's eyes grew big, but she didn't say anything. Instead, she looked out the window as if she were second-guessing coming out here. He wondered about her. A pretty woman without a husband. He would wager there was a good story behind that.

Sighing to himself, he again pulled his hat down to try and get some sleep. Two days of walking across a desert will take a good chunk out of a man.

As his mind drifted, he thought of Burk, the man he had been chasing. The shot that had taken his horse had come from a good four hundred yards away, up in a rocky outcropping. For the thousandth time, he cursed himself. Two weeks in the saddle was no excuse.

He'd been careful all the way down from Oregon. But he'd dropped his guard at just the wrong time and lost a good horse. What was more, the man could be anywhere by now and headed in a dozen different directions, San Antonio, St Louis, or back to Santa Fe. There was no telling until he got back out there and picked up the trail again.

What if he lost him? The thought sent a cold dread to the bottom of his stomach. He'd been taught by the best; Zion could track a bird across bare rock. But it might be days before he got back there, and the wind might brush away any traces of his quarry. One thing he knew, he didn't have to worry about rain washing out the trail. Not in this land.

Let it go, Jake, he told himself. Nothing he could do about it at the moment.

As sleep slowly crept upon him, his last thought was about the woman sitting across from him. Something about her pulled at his gut. That special combination of beautiful and kind. He could see it in her eyes. The type of woman who could make a man glad to be alive.

Mary Rose fought to not look at the man across from her. He had already caught her staring once. It hurt to think of him laughing at her. Being thought of as nothing more than a silly girl would be soul crushing.

But still, she couldn't keep her mind away from thinking about him. Who was he? She desperately wanted to know his story. Everything about him. His family, his dreams, why he was chasing this man. Everything.

He had said he used to be a lawman. Was that why he was after the man?

He was so different than the men back home. Harder, rougher, without any refinement. As if all the unnecessary parts had been rubbed off. But there had been something in the smile he gave Amy that told her he wasn't mean. Just hard.

And then there was the way he had answered Thomas's question. As if the boy had worth. It was impossible to imagine someone like Brandon Brooks ever doing that. To him, people were only worth what they could do to make his life better.

The man across from her was distinct. Even after a long dry walk through the desert, he hadn't taken out his frustration on those around him. Hadn't exposed a mean, evil side. Who was he?

But of course, she could never ask. Besides being rude, he would definitely know she was curious about him.

Instead, she watched from the corner of his eye as he fell asleep. Every time the stage rocked; she would quickly look away unless he woke to find her eyes studying him.

His rifle rested between his leg and the stage side. She remembered the sight of him walking out of the desert holding that rifle as if it were an extension of his arm. His gray hat was pulled low. His long legs crossed at the ankle. Tall and lean, no fat, no waste. All man.

Oregon, he had said. That seemed so far away. Did he have family there? A wife? Surely no woman would allow her husband to leave her and chase a man all the way to Texas.

Or a sweetheart perhaps. It was very easy to imagine a dozen different women pining after him. A man like this would attract women like bees to honey.

Biting her lip, she silently shook her head at her silliness. She had barely met the man and she was already wondering about his sweetheart. A quick hint of shame filled her. The last thing she needed

to be doing was getting all moon-eyed over some strange cowboy.

They would share a stage then he would disappear.

No, she needed to remain focused on what was important. Getting Amy and Thomas to their uncle's. That was all she should worry about. But still, a secret dream began to form at the bottom of her stomach. A world of what-ifs. A world where she got what she wanted instead of always making sure others got theirs.

Sighing to herself, she turned to stare out across the wide desert. Sparse bushes and straggly mesquite trees stretched out into the far distance. A tall tendril of dust danced across the flat ground.

Such a different land, she thought to herself for the hundredth time.

What was Oregon like? She wondered. Was it green and plentiful? The stories about Oregon had been so different than the ones about the hard land of West Texas. A land of thorns, wild Indians, hot summers, and hard men.

Thomas nudged her in the ribs then nodded to the other window where a long-legged bird ran along the trail, easily keeping pace with the stage. She smiled down at her brother. He smiled back then returned to reading his book.

Mary took a deep breath. Had she done the right thing? Taking them from all they knew. Thomas was destined for more. His intelligence had set him apart. He had long ago passed what his teachers could impart. But out here. What would happen to a boy like Thomas? How could he ever fit in?

Here, a man would be judged on what he could do with a horse or a gun. Book learning would have little value.

Amy now, would have no problem. She had never met a stranger. Everything was exciting and fun. She would easily bend this world to her will. No, she needn't worry about Amy.

But what about herself. What would her life be like? A woman of twenty, not married, with no prospects. She would live on an isolated ranch in the middle of nowhere. Her stomach clenched when she thought about the loneliness that stretched out in front of her.

Would she have to settle for the first man to show any interest?

Closing her eyes, she leaned her head back and let her mind drift. Family, she realized, her own. That was what she wanted. A good man, someone she could respect. A man who would be there every day, helping, working to build something.

Her eyes opened as she looked across at Mr. Parker.

No, she realized with a deep sadness. This was not such a man. He

obviously had too much of a wanderlust burning a hole in him. He was too hard, and too intractable to ever think about settling down and building a life.

She thought back to her mother's warning on her sixteenth birthday. Don't fall in love with excitement, she had said with a pained look. Calm and steady is so much better.

At the time, Mary Rose had instantly known her mother had regrets about falling in love with her father. A man with big dreams and wild stories, but a man who just didn't know how to settle down in one place and put his shoulder to the grindstone.

A man who always thought it would be better in the next town. The next wild dream would be what saved them.

Instead, he'd left a family in poverty with no roots except a distant uncle in the wilds of West Texas.

Sighing again, she closed her eyes and tried to put all out of her mind. She was drifting off into that special place between worlds when the crack of a whip and the shout of the driver made her jump.

Her eyes opened to see Mr. Parker leaning out the window cursing under his breath.

"What is it?" Mary Rose asked as her stomach tightened with dread.

Mr. Parker looked back at her with worried eyes, "Indians. Comanche"

Her heart stopped as she instinctively wrapped an arm around both Amy and Thomas and pulled them close. "What do they want?"

He shook his head, "They ain't here to invite us to Sunday dinner."

Mary fought to understand what was happening. Her world had become completely turned over. One moment she was dreaming about family. The next they were fighting to save their lives.

Chapter Four

The bone chilling crack of a distant rifle echoed off the inside walls of the stage. A man screamed above them. Mary Rose gasped as a body fell from the box to bounce on the ground, barely missing the wagon's wheels. The shotgun guard, she realized with pure terror.

"Get down and stay down," Mr. Parker yelled as he reached over and pushed her and the children down.

She held on to them as they crouched on the floor of the stage. How was this possible? She had been such a fool, coming here, bringing Amy and Thomas. Her stomach churned with terror as the air exploded with a rifle shot.

Mr. Parker was leaning out the window, firing his rifle at the attacking Indians. Smooth, calm. Like a man at a county fair.

The stage bumped and swayed as the driver whipped the horses. Mr. Pierce had removed a small pistol from his pocket and was aiming out the other window.

Please, she begged, please let them get free. A thousand terrible stories danced through her head. God, please she prayed.

"Here," Mr. Parker said holding out his rifle as he drew one of his pistols. "Reload for me, shells in my bag."

Mary could only stare in confusion. Load? How? "Here," she said as she thrust the weapon to her brother and started digging through Mr. Parker's saddle bags. Shirts, socks, a small tin pot, final a cardboard box.

Mr. Parker drew his other pistol and returned to firing out the window.

Scrambling, she began to give Thomas the shells. He fed them into the rifle's lock. Then held it up for Mr. Parker.

The tall cowboy had just turned back for his rifle when a horse screamed, and the stage jumped into the air.

Thomas and Amy tumbled over her as the three were tossed about in a churning world of confusion. Mary was thrown from one side to the other as the stage tipped and fell onto its side in a new world of dust and stones.

Her mind whirled as she tried to understand. A cloud of arid dust and bitter gun smoke engulfed the stage. Her stomach clenched as she quickly fought to see if her brother and sister still lived.

"Thomas, Amy," she gasped as she ran her hand over them. Both stared back at her in shock, but they were alive, she realized with a relieved heart. No broken bones. No blood. By some miracle, they had

survived.

Another gunshot echoed through the stage. Mr. Parker was standing up through the open door, now their roof, and firing. Keeping the attackers away. Her heart jumped as she realized their danger had not disappeared. Now they were trapped. Unable to escape.

“Mama,” a soft moan from Mr. Pierce brought her back to reality. The older man’s arm and shoulder were trapped beneath the stage and the hard ground. Her insides turned to stone at the sight of mangled flesh and the blood flowing from him.

The man’s eyes opened as he stared at her, “mama?” he asked before he took his last breath.

She froze, the man had died before she could do anything for him. One moment he was there, then he was gone.

“Here,” Mr. Parker said as he dropped his gun belt and two pistols. “Reload.”

Then returned to the doorway and fired his rifle.

My god, Mary thought. We are all going to die.

Jake Parker sighted down his rifle barrel at a fleeing Indian. It was better to track them coming or going, Zion had taught him. Don't swing trying to get them as they passed.

His finger squeezed, but at the last moment, his target disappeared as the Indian slid over the side of his horse and hung to its neck. He'd heard stories, but it was amazing to see in real life.

At the far end of his range, the Indian swung his horse to make another pass, leading the Indians in an oval around the stage, and all the time, never giving him a target to shoot at.

Relaxing his finger, he spun around to find another target. Over a dozen warriors, he'd wager. A healthy mix of bows and rifles. His gut turned over when he glanced at the stagecoach driver lying in the dirt with three arrows in his chest.

They were in some difficulty, he'd bet. There would be no help. No cavalry coming over the hill to save them.

He glanced down at the three people huddling in the bottom of the stage. All three of them looked up at him, expecting him to save them somehow, their eyes pleading, begging. God, it was enough to make a man want to kill something. But he needed to keep his head. Zion had drilled it into him year after year. No man won a fight like this by letting his emotions take over.

Mentally, he quickly counted his ammunition. A sick feeling of dread filled him. He needed to make every shot count, or they'd bleed him dry and take them with ease.

Rising back up he was preparing another shot when the stage jerked across the ground.

The team, or at least five of the six horses, were screaming and kicking to get away. The sixth lay on the ground dead.

"Here," the boy said as he handed up the gun belt with freshly loaded pistols.

Jake nodded his thanks to the boy then returned to the window just in time to see an Indian swerve towards them. Leaning on the far side of the horse, he pulled an arrow back to shoot under the horse's neck.

There was just enough for Jake to fire.

The warrior jerked back, the bow and two fingers falling beneath the horses' hooves.

"Get Pierce's gun," he yelled down at the woman. "You might be needing it."

He looked down and stared at her for a good moment, silently telling her the truth. It would be her choice, but if she had any sense, she'd use the gun on herself before she let them take her. But he would never know because he would be long dead before he allowed that to happen.

She looked back up at him in shock at his silent message then seemed to come to some kind of resolution as she quickly scrambled to retrieve Pierce's weapon.

"Stay here," he told her. "They don't know you lot are in here."

Her brow creased in confusion.

Ignoring her, he popped back up out of the door and let loose with five quick shots from his rifle. Dropped it down to the boy then pushed himself up through the door. This had to work. It was their only hope.

Ducking, he raced to the horses. Drawing his knife, he slashed at the harnesses before reaching for the pin holding the crossbeam to the stage. A scream behind him made him duck as he turned and drew his pistol. Mary Rose was using both hands to aim Pierce's gun at a young brave running towards him.

She fired, the boy dropped and rolled behind some bushes. Jake didn't pause to see if she'd hit him. Instead, he quickly pulled the pin and slapped at the horses until they took off, racing down the dirt road as if the devil himself was after them.

"Get back down," he cursed as he rushed back up onto the stage before dropping through the door. "I thought I told you to stay hidden," he yelled, unable to believe she had been so foolhardy.

"But ..." she stammered "They were going to kill you."

He growled under his breath as he snatched the rifle from the boy's hands and returned to the door. Peeking out, he watched as almost a dozen Indians chased after the team. Please he prayed. Let that be enough.

His heart pounded in his chest as he twisted, scanning for more attackers. Seeing nothing, he turned again to watch the dust disappear into the distance. Would they come back?

For the longest minute, he held his breath. They could take him. He might keep them off for a bit, but eventually, they'd get him. The only question were they willing to pay the price? If they were like the Yakima or Shoshone back home. They'd be satisfied with the horses.

But these Comanche, who could tell?

Biting the inside of his cheek, he continued to scan the area. One could be lurking in the bushes not a dozen feet away and he'd never

see him. Again, and again, his gaze was drawn to where that young brave had rolled into the bushes. Had the woman shot him? Or had another warrior pulled him up behind him to chase after the horses?

Finally, he slumped down to sit on his haunches.

“Are they gone?” the little girl asked.

“For now,” he answered with a quick smile. God, his heart hurt thinking of the terror she and the others had experienced. No child should have to feel that.

A distant memory of renegades attacking him and his family on the wagon train west sent a cold shiver down his spine. He’d been the same age as this little girl and the nightmares had come to him for years after that incident.

He popped back up for a quick look. He held his breath then let out a long sigh. They were gone. At least for now.

“I don’t think that Indian saw you,” he said to the woman. “If’n he had. They might not have been in such a rush to leave us.”

She frowned for a moment then looked down, unable to meet his gaze.

“We’ll give them a bit then start out for Wild China Pond, the next station.”

“That’s ten miles away,” she gasped.

“Almost seven, I would say. It’s closer than going back.”

Her brow knitted for a moment then nodded.

He watched her closely. No, she wasn’t going to fall apart. No dramatics. No wailing at the unfairness of life. Instead, he watched as she set her shoulders and nodded. Accepting what must be done.

The two young ’uns were just as steady. Frightened, but not hopeless.

“You lot stay here,” he said to them as he opened the door above him and prepared to get out. “And I mean it this time. I can’t keep watch on everything.”

“But can’t we help? Keep watch?” she asked.

He closed his eyes and fought to keep his anger in check. Dropping back down, he looked at her, frowning as he shook his head. “Miss McCain, do you have a great deal of experience dealing with hostile Indians?”

“Of course not.”

“Then, please just do what I ask. I don’t have time to be explaining things all the time.”

Her face grew white with rage which almost made him smile.

Anger was good. It meant she was still with him. She hadn't given up. Good, she could hate him all she wanted for all he cared as long as it helped get her and the others to safety.

Ignoring her, he quickly exited the stage and dropped to the ground. His shoulders itched with worry as he waited for some screaming warrior to rise up out of the dust from behind some mesquite bush and attack him. Only when nothing happened was, he able to take a deep breath and start back down the trail.

He carried his rifle close, ready to bring it up if necessary. As he walked, he continually looked back over his shoulder to make sure they hadn't gotten out.

The stage looked unusual resting on its side. Like a strange bump in the land that didn't belong there.

It was almost a hundred yards before he found what he was looking for. The shotgun guard. No man deserved to be left to the coyotes, he thought as he worked to get the man up onto his shoulder. A quick scan didn't disclose the man's weapon and he didn't have time to search for it.

Holding him and his rifle with one hand, he left his other ready to draw if necessary. He brought the man back and laid him down next to the driver. Two good men gone, he thought as he shook his head.

"All right," he said as he leaned over the door and stared down into the stage. "You can get out now but stay close."

Stepping back, he held out a hand to help Miss McCain up onto the side of the stage. She paused for a moment to look towards where the Indians had disappeared.

Finally, she seemed to accept that they were actually gone.

He smiled up at her then before she could object, he wrapped his hands around her waist to lift her down.

She gasped for a second but couldn't help but smile. Those blushing cheeks and surprised look were too delectable to ignore.

He helped the other two down. The three of them shuffled and kept staring off into the distance as if expecting the Indians to return at any moment.

"Here, hold this," he said to the boy as he handed him his rifle then dropped down into the stage to recover the body of Pierce. When he had all three men laid out next to the road, he began gathering good size rocks and covering them. It would have to be enough until the stage line could get out here and give them a proper burial.

As he turned for another stone, he was surprised to see the others approaching with rocks of their own. The four of them working

together quickly had the men covered enough to protect them from the critters.

Standing back, he removed his hat and gave the men a moment of silence then turned and raised an eyebrow.

Before starting, he'd searched them for anything useful. The only thing he'd held back were their hats. The men wouldn't need them where they were going, and these people could.

Tossing them to Miss McCain, he said, "You lot will be needing these. That pillbox you're wearing won't cut it."

She frowned at him then looked down at the hats he'd handed her.

"You got anything important in your bags?" he asked. "it's a long walk. And we ain't got any water. The bag was busted under the stage.

The woman's eyes grew big as she looked down the road. "Can we come back for our things"

He shrugged. "I can't guarantee it will be here. One of them carpet bags is the most I can carry. I got to keep one hand free just in case."

Slowly a sign of realization crossed her face as she came to understand they were not out of danger.

"We will carry it," she said to him. "Give me a minute and I will combine what we need into one bag."

He nodded, then looked down the road to the next station then up into the sky at the hot sun. It was going to be a long walk. And his gut told him them Indians might be just cantankerous enough to come back and finish what they started.

Chapter Five

Mary Rose McCain fought to gather her wits as she tried to understand all that had happened. Her world had changed. Death and destruction had visited her and left their mark. It took every bit of self-control to keep from screaming in frustration.

Instead, she focused on combining the essentials into one bag. She thought back to rummaging through Mr. Parker's bag looking for bullets. How could a person survive with so little?

But Mr. Parker was correct. They couldn't load themselves down so heavily that they couldn't move. Or worse, couldn't react if attacked again.

But the thought of leaving their things tore at her insides. This was everything they owned. Thomas's books. Amy's dresses. Her mother's keepsakes. Those few things she'd been able to keep her husband from selling. The China Plate from New York. The three cameos. The small painting of the falls in Niagara.

She must leave them behind. Her dresses. Her fancy shoes. Everything. Only the essentials. Only those things that were needed to stay alive.

As she fumbled through their traveling trunk, she couldn't push the memory of that Indian rushing at Mr. Parker, from her mind. The hate and determination in the warrior's eyes as he raced at his prey.

The explosion of the pistol had come as a shock. She had reacted without thinking. Silently, she sent up a prayer thanking God that she had not killed the man.

"We need to hurry," Mr. Parker growled from the other side of the stage.

She could only shake her head. The man had asked her to abandon everything she owned in this world, and he was upset that she wasn't acting fast enough. Well, blast him. He could wait.

Grabbing a change of clothes for each of them. She stuffed them into a carpetbag. Then her mother's combs and a book for Thomas. The boy would be lost without something to read.

She ran her fingers over the spines and finally decided on Homer's Odyssey. It seemed appropriate for some reason.

Once the bag was full, she paused for a moment then tucked the three cameos into the side. One for each child, her mother had told her. All they would ever have of her, she thought with a heavy sigh

Rounding the corner of the stage, she found. Mr. Parker was looking down the rough road into the far distance. Amy and Thomas

stood next to him. Both wearing cowboy hats.

“Look, Mary Rose,” Amy said as she showed her hat. “Mr. Parker put cloth in the band so that it would fit.”

She could only nod. Her sister was wearing a dead man’s hat, and it was the right thing to do. That fact drove home just how much her world had changed.

Thomas gave her a strange look then reached over to take the bag from her hand.

She studied him for a quick second. His normally serious expression had deepened. As if he had aged a dozen years in as many minutes.

“Here,” Mr. Parker said as he reached up and pulled the hatpin keeping her small hat on her head. Her body trembled at his touch. It was such an intimate moment.

He looked down into her eyes and froze for just a second then shook his head. “We can’t have such a pretty face burned. Skin that soft deserves to be protected.” Still looking into her eyes, he gently placed the last hat on her head, adjusted it, then smiled slightly at her. “Even an ugly hat can’t hide that face.”

Her heart jumped at his compliment. Why was he saying things like that to her? Now? Here? Did he really think she was pretty? She so wanted to ask him. So, wanted to know what he really thought about her.

One moment he was barking orders, then he could be sweet, almost gentle. A man of contradictions if ever there was one.

Thinking of home, she mentally compared him to the men she had known. Not just Brandon. But others. Yes, she had been complimented before. Even praised. But it was different coming from this man. Somehow, she knew that he meant it, and from a man like this, that said a great deal.

He’d repeatedly risked his life to protect them. Exposing himself while they had cowered at the bottom of the stage. Jumping out into the line of fire to set the horses free. Closing her eyes, she silently sent up a prayer of thanks for sending such a man as this when they needed him the most.

“Come on,” he said as he turned to start up the road.

Mary Rose had to push herself to start after him as her mind whirled with the memory of his touch. What it had felt like to have his hands around her waist as he helped her down from the stage.

Don’t, she told herself. Don’t become lost in silly dreams. She had one duty, and one duty only. Get her family to safety.

But that didn't stop her from admiring the man as he walked in front of them. Long legs, wide shoulders. He moved easily. Leading them, protecting them. No, it was easy to admire such a man.

Rushing she caught up to her brother and sister and fell into step with them. As they walked, she studied the countryside. Flat, bushes, cactus, and heat were her only impressions.

"See them rocks up there, to the left?" Mr. Parker asked as he pointed with his rifle. "If'n they Indians come back, make for those rocks. We'll hold them off there."

She swallowed hard. Would they come back? Perhaps they should have stayed with the stage until someone came. These and a dozen other thoughts danced through her head until she became too tired to think.

One step after another. That was all she could focus on.

"I'm thirsty," Amy said.

"I know honey," Mary replied as she tugged the little girl's hat lower to better shield her face. "We'll get water at the next station."

Thomas took a deep breath then shifted the carpetbag to his other hand.

Mary was about to offer to take it from him when Mr. Parker stopped, stepped back towards them, and took the bag from the boy's hand.

"You carried it farther than I thought you would," he said gently. "Let me take it for a while then you can have it back."

"I can carry it," Mary offered.

He smiled at her then shook his head, "Ain't no need. Between Tommy and myself, we can handle it."

Mary Rose bit down a sharp reply. She despised being thought of as weaker. Less somehow. But then she saw the look on Thomas's face. He had been included in this man's world. As if he had value. The brightness of his eyes and the upward tilt of his lips let her know just how much it had meant to him.

Mr. Parker turned and again started up the road. They walked on in silence until he turned to Thomas and said, "Never did thank you for loading my rifle. You done a real job of it. I figure it made the difference."

Mary watched as Thomas's chest expanded with pride.

"And you Miss Amy," Mr. Parker continued. "I don't think I ever seen a braver girl in my life. You didn't flinch once. Believe me, I noticed. It reminded me of my sister HannahHannahh when we crossed the Blue Mountains in a blizzard. I didn't think anyone could

be braver until I saw you earlier.”

Amy's faced turned red as she stared down at the ground.

Mary was flabbergasted. For the first time in the little girl's life, she was speechless.

“What about Mary Rose,” Amy asked him. “She fired that man's pistol. I saw it. She didn't even close her eyes.”

“Right you are,” Mr. Parker said as he turned to look over at her. “Pretty and brave. A strong combination.”

Mary Rose felt a thrill run down her spine. Suddenly, the world didn't seem such a terrible place.

Jake took a deep breath as he studied the road in front of them. The smart thing would have been to cut across country, but he wasn't sure he could have found the station. Besides, he didn't think these three would have held up well climbing over sharp rocks and through mesquite thorns and cactus spikes.

No, he'd just have to keep a sharp lookout and get them to safety if he spotted the Indians coming back.

Taking a deep breath, he thought about what next. He'd get them to the station and if necessary, into Fort Stockton. Get a horse and start after Burk again. And what then? He wondered.

Back to Oregon? Back to Zion and Luke's ranch. Why? He'd spend the rest of his life wrangling horses. Breaking them for the Army. For what?

No, life needed to mean more than that. There had been a time when Luke had been off fighting in the war that Jake had wanted nothing more than a great adventure. It had been one of the main reasons he'd helped Luke by becoming his deputy.

After that, heaven knew, he'd had more than enough adventures to satisfy most men. He'd traveled down to the goldfields in California. Helped Luke tame that town in Nevada. Pushed a heard of mustangs to Montana. Watched first Zion and Hannah, then Luke and Rebecca start families. And all the while he knew that something was missing. Something important.

"Mr. Parker ..." Miss McCain started.

"Jake," he said to her. "You fight off an Indian attack and it gives you the right to use first names."

She laughed. "Mary, then. Or Mary Rose."

"Pretty name."

The silence behind him let him know that she was blushing. That was one of the things he had noticed about her. She blushed easily and there weren't many prettier sights in this world than Mary Rose McCain blushing.

"How much further?" she asked.

He stopped and turned back. He'd pulled too far away he realized. Their legs weren't as long as his. He chastised himself. This was what happened when you didn't pay attention.

He waited until they caught up with him then fell in step with Mary before looking over at her brother. "What would you say, Tommy?"

The boy looked up, surprised to be asked. "Somewhere between two and three miles."

Jake nodded in agreement then turned to the little girl. "How about you Miss Amy. Can you make it, or do I need to stuff you in this bag and carry you?"

The little girl laughed at his ridiculousness. "That isn't too far."

"No, it's not," he said with a smile. "Why, I remember, I wasn't much more than your age when we walked from Missouri to Oregon. Now that was a walk to remember."

"You came out in a wagon train?" Mary asked him with obvious surprise.

"Summer of Fifty-Four."

She frowned for a moment then asked. "And your family is still in Oregon?"

He nodded as pleasant memories rushed in. "The East side of the Cascades. They got a right nice horse ranch. Run a few head of cattle, but we focus on horses mostly."

"And they are all right with you coming to West Texas all alone."

He laughed. "Zion and Hannah learned early they couldn't keep me in one place for long. I'd go out exploring, then come back and get to know my nieces and nephews again. Between Luke and Zion, they must have more than a dozen."

She frowned as she bit her lip. "And your wife is all right with that?"

He laughed. "Ain't no woman dumb enough to take on a man like me."

She continued to frown.

A strange feeling filled him as he watched her chew at the corner of her mouth. He'd seen the same look in both Hannah and Rebecca, she wanted to ask a dozen questions but hadn't yet figured out the best approach. Well, he'd just leave her to it. She'd ask them when she was ready.

The foursome continued on. As the sun sank lower in the west, a faint breeze picked up, bringing the smell of sage and mesquite mixed in with dust. Always dust.

A silence fell over them as they made their way towards the next station, each lost in their own thoughts. Each focused on putting one foot in front of the other and getting where they needed to be.

The sun had almost reached the distant horizon when Jake cursed under his breath. They'd approached the station around a bend in the

trail. His stomach clenched before he could even recognize the problem.

“Hold up,” he said as reached out a hand to stop the small group.

The station was four hundred yards up the trail. But something wasn’t right. Something had set off every alarm he ever had.

“Why are we stopping,” Miss McCain asked as she stepped up next to him to stare at the distant stage station.

He growled under his breath. When would she learn to stop asking questions? If he knew why they were stopping he would have told her.

He ignored her as he continued to study the situation. Typical stone building in amongst a rocky outcrop. Stone corral. The stage driver had called it Wild China Pond and mentioned how the line had to bring in water during the summer months when the natural tanks dried out.

Still, he studied the station until he finally recognized the problem.

“Darn it,” he cursed as he gritted his teeth. A sick awareness filled him with dread.

“What is it?” she asked next to him.

“Too much wood smoke smell. That ain’t no campfire.”

Hurrying, the station came into better few, and his stomach dropped. Stone walls blackened by fire. No roof, and a woodshed off to the side nothing but charred timbers.

And worse of all, no horses.

Mary gasped, “Are they still alive. The station master?”

He shrugged, “My gut tells me no.”

Her face turned pale as she realized they were still alone, and they had not yet reached safety.

Chapter Six

Mary Rose stared at the destroyed stage station with despair. A sick feeling of helplessness filled her. They had walked so far. This was to be their refuge. But even here, the danger hung over them.

“Stay here,” Mr. Parker, Jake, said as he dropped the carpet bag at his feet.

She held out a hand to hold both Thomas and Amy back then reached into her pocket and removed Mr. Pierce’s pistol. Her hands shook. How had she gotten herself and the others into this situation? She stood on a desert road with a pistol in her hand. Watching a tall stranger walk in to investigate.

What if something happened to him, she suddenly realized with terror. They would never survive without him. The facts could not be denied. She would be lost. Her family’s very survival relied upon this man, and he was walking into danger.

“Please be careful,” she called after him then cringed when she realized how stupid she sounded. What, he was going to be uncareful? No. she must let him do what he must.

Little Amy looked up at her with fearful eyes, questioning. “Were the Indians here?”

“Come and gone,” Thomas said.

He was trying to reassure his sister, Mary Rose realized, but she could see the worry in his eyes.

Mary Rose bit her lip as she watched Jake crouch down next to a brown stain in the dust just outside of the empty doorway to the station. Slowly he looked off to the southwest then back down at the stain. Finally, he stood up, scanned the area, then gingerly stepped into the station.

She held her breath waiting for him to come back out. Please, she begged. Don’t let him get hurt. It surprised her to realize she wasn’t only worrying about her family’s safety. But it would devastate her at her very core if something happened to him.

“Mr. Parker, Jake,” she called out when the tension became too much to bear.

He stepped back outside and waved them forward.

She let out a long breath. No Indians. Closing her eyes, she silently said a prayer of thanks then grabbed the carpetbag and hurried to the station.

Jake pointed to the stain in the dirt. “Don’t know if it was the station master or an Indian, but someone bled a lot then was carried

off.”

Her insides tightened. “Anyone inside?” She could tell that he knew she was asking if there were bodies in the station. “Should we try to find him?”

Shaking his head, he frowned. “Horses drove off, place burned. The only reason they’d take the stationmaster is if he was alive. And he ain’t alive by now. I can promise you.”

A cold fear filled her as she thought about the poor man.

Jake nodded at the water trough on its side.

She licked her cracked lips. It hurt her insides to think of all that water draining into the dust.

“We need to find water,” he said. “Must be up in them rocks. A seasonal tank, I’d wager.”

A new fear filled her. Him up there looking for water and the Indians returning. That fear was immediately replaced with the terror of not finding water. She knew in her heart they would never survive without it. Not in this heat.

Turning, Jake went back into the station then returned with an empty goatskin water bag. It was only partially burned. “Tommy and I will be back in a minute.”

She started to object. The idea of Thomas being away from her felt too wrong.

Seeing her concern, Jake said, “he needs to know where it is.” That was it, no further explanation. A simple statement that he expected her to accept. Pausing for a moment she argued with herself then nodded her approval.

“How will we find it?” Thomas asked as he took the skin bag from Jake’s hand.

The tall cowboy smiled then indicated a buzzing bee. “They need flowers, and flowers need water. We’ll follow him to where he’s going.”

Mary Rose watched as her brother’s eyebrows rose. He so loved learning new things. Unfortunately, she feared he was going to learn things about life that she had always wished could be shielded from him.

Taking a deep breath, she watched them start to work their way up into a rocky outcrop a hundred yards from the wagon road.

Setting her shoulders, she touched Amy’s shoulder. “Come on, let us see if we can find any food the Indians didn’t take. The others will be hungry when they get back.”

Amy studied her for a moment then looked at the pistol in her big sister's hand.

Mary Rose balked for a moment; she had forgotten she was even carrying it. Blushing, she quickly stuffed it back into the pocket of her dress then hurried into the station.

The pungent stink of charred wood made her cringe as she pushed aside the door hanging on a single hinge. The wooden roof had collapsed into the room, bringing the fire to the few tables and chairs. She pointed to the far corner of the room for her sister to start looking then said, "Try not to get too dirty."

Amy scoffed as she held her skirts to try and keep them off the burnt wood.

Mary swallowed hard and started looking in the opposite corner from her sister. Thankfully, with no roof, there was plenty of light. As she shifted through the debris, she couldn't help wondering about the people here. God, she hoped they'd escaped. Maybe even now they were on the road to the next station.

"Here," Amy said with a huge smile as she held up a large cast-iron frying pan.

"Good," Mary Rose said to her with a big smile. Give Amy a goal and she would think of nothing else. Sighing inside, Mary Rose wondered how would her sister and brother react to the attack, the sense of knowing they could die at any minute?

Pushing those thoughts away she focused on finding food. Over the next few minutes, they located enough tools to create a small kitchen. The pan, metal plates, five tin cups, a large spoon, and three forks.

Her heart was beginning to worry about finding food when she shifted a charred board and found a small bag of corn meal. Holding her breath, she opened the bag to find most of it burnt brown, but cracking it open, deep inside she found about two cups of the corn that had survived.

Her stomach rumbled as she thought about the Mexican woman at the last station making tortillas.

"Mary Rose, Amy," Thomas called from outside.

Mary stuck her head out and smiled. Her brother held up a wet water bag and a long-eared rabbit.

"Jake killed him with a rock. One throw."

She ignored him as she focused on the bag. Amy raced past her to pour water into a cup and sigh with contentment as she quickly gulped down a long drink.

It took Mary every bit of effort to stop from demanding the cup from her sister so she could take her turn. Who was she kidding? It was taking every bit of effort to stop from pouring the water over her head.

Finally, Amy held out the cup for her. Mary let Thomas tip the bag and fill the cup. She brought it up to her lips to taste the sweetest nectar ever. The cool water seemed to soak into her mouth before she could swallow.

“Take it slow,” Jake said, “a minute between drinks.”

“It was like he said,” Thomas said with excitement. “That bee led us straight to some flowers next to a hollow spot in some rocks surrounded by wildflowers. Firewheel, and some prairie cornflowers, Jake said.”

She noticed that Jake almost smiled at her brother’s exuberance then indicated the rabbit. “It won’t have much meat, but it can flavor some beans if you find any.”

“Just corn,” she said. “I will make us some tortillas. We’ll wrap them around the rabbit meat.”

He smiled at her and she felt her world shift as she soaked up his approval. It was important to her she realized that this man respected her as much as she respected him.

Jake turned to look at the sinking sun and smiled. “We’ll get a fire behind the corral. The flames will be hidden, and it’ll soon be dark enough, so they won’t see the smoke.”

Mary’s heart sank as she realized they were not out of danger. Would she ever again know a sense of safety?

It didn’t take long until she was cooking tortillas and roasting the rabbit. After they had finished their meager meal, the four of them leaned next to the stone corral wall and allowed their bodies to relax.

Mary’s shoulders tensed as she realized that Jake was but inches from her. Even sitting down, she felt small and feminine next to him. A feeling that she greatly enjoyed.

The four of them sat there in silence until Thomas hopped up. “I want to go get some more water; the bag is almost empty.”

Jake nodded.

Mary gasped, “But ...”

Thomas shot her an angry scowl then grabbed the bag and started up for the rocky outcrop.

“He will be fine,” Amy said as she snuggled in next to Mary. “Thomas is too smart to ever do anything wrong.”

Mary smiled down at her sister as she put her arm around her. It was difficult to determine if her sister had intended that as a compliment or not.

“We’ll rest up for a few hours then head out.”

Her stomach clenched. “Are you hoping the Indians won’t travel at night?”

He laughed. “See that,” he said pointing to the large silvery moon. “They call it a Comanche Moon, because they use it on their raids. Darkness is their friend, believe me. No. I want to start out tonight because tomorrow is going to be a scorcher and the more road we can travel before it gets too hot, the better.”

She sighed as she accepted his judgement. Her body ached, her feet screamed in pain, and her mind still swirled with all the things that had happened to them that day. She wanted nothing more than to sleep in a fluffy bed and pull the blankets over her head to keep out this terrible world.

As she sat there, an awkwardness settled over them while she tried to think of something to say that didn’t make her sound silly, or worse, whinny, like a petulant child. What was it about this man that made her question everything about herself? Or was it this land? This strange world where all the rules she had believed to be true no longer applied.

Glancing from the corner of her eyes, she clenched her teeth. The man seemed so comfortable. As if he had no worry in the world. As if hiding behind a stone fence in the middle of nowhere was perfectly normal.

Even worse, it didn’t appear that she made him nervous in the slightest. Other than that, comment about her pretty face, he had been oblivious. No special smiles. No furtive looks, or quick glances. No indication that he found her attractive. It was enough to make a girl question herself.

“Why are you tracking that man?” she asked before she could stop herself. But the silence was too deafening,

Jake looked off into the distance. “He killed a friend of mine, Ian McCallister. Killed him for his horse.”

She shuddered at the anger in his eyes.

He took a deep breath. “Ian never hurt no one. He weren’t but seventeen. A Mormon boy. Worked for Zion on the ranch. A good boy with the potential of being a good man.”

Her heart broke. Why was there such violence in the world?

“Tracked his killer to Twin falls. That’s where I learned the name

he was going by. The hostler recognized our brand, gave me a description of the man. But I was too late."

"I'm sorry about your friend."

He gave her a sad smile then looked into the growing gloom.

The two of them sat there in silence. Amy had fallen asleep next to her. Mary couldn't help wondering if they had met in different circumstances would he have felt differently about her. A sadness filled her for some unknown reason.

Again, the awkwardness returned until she saw Thomas rushing towards them, the bag banging against his leg.

"A campfire," he said breathlessly as he pointed to the south. "I saw it. Maybe five miles or so."

Jake frowned, then shook his head.

"What?" Mary asked. "The Indians?"

Nodding he said, "If they ain't worried about their campfire being seen. That means they've met up with a large bunch."

"Might it be someone other than the Indians?"

"Not if they have any sense. No one would announce themselves to the world like that. Not unless they are an army patrol. And they'd be wanting to keep themselves unknown. No. it's the Comanche. I'd bet my life on it. And there's more of them."

Her heart stopped. Five miles. It was so close. They could return and be here within half an hour. "What are we going to do?" she asked him as she reached over to grab his arm?

He smiled down at her then said then glanced up at the dark sky. "We start now, if they're bedded down, this is the best time."

"But ..."

Jake glanced at her brother and sister then back to her, silently telling her that this was necessary if she wanted her siblings to live.

"Drink up," he told the others. "We'll fill the bag one last time and head off."

"How far?" Mary asked, afraid of the answer.

He took a deep breath. "Twenty miles to Castle Gap, the last bit of it uphill."

Mary's feet screamed in defiance. God, would this ever end?

Chapter Seven

Jake made sure everyone took a last drink then put a finger to his lips and nodded up the trail. Sound traveled far in the desert. Especially at night. The three of them looked up with worried expressions that pulled at his heart. He needed to get these people to safety. He wouldn't feel comfortable until he deposited them on their uncle's doorstep.

"Let me take that," he whispered to Tommy as he relieved him of the carpet bag. It was a long walk to the next station, and they needed to keep up their strength.

The cool night air washed over him as his ears reached out, searching for any hint of danger. Zion had taught him years ago that at night, his ears would almost always know before his eyes did.

Even on a night like this with a bright moon and a million stars, the darkness hid too many surprises. Things looked different at night, he reminded himself. The silvery shadows could hide an entire tribe let alone a single warrior.

Glancing over he caught Mary giving him a reassuring smile. As if saying that she trusted him. It was the kind of smile that could twist a man's guts into a knot.

What was it about this woman that tugged at him? He'd known pretty women before. But there was something different about her. He couldn't help but think back to the two of them sitting with their backs to the corral wall. That awkward silence between them.

A coyote yapped in the distance, and another answered, pulling him back to the here and now. "Pay attention," he muttered to himself. This was not the time to let his head get turned by a pretty face.

Setting his jaw, he forced himself to push away thoughts that could go nowhere, instead, he reviewed the chase of Burk down from Oregon and went over everything he had learned about the man. His habits on the trail. Who he interacted with when passing through a town?

Really, he would have no choice but to go back to where he had lost him and start all over.

The four of them walked quietly down the dusty road for over an hour. When he noticed Amy starting to falter, he hissed to them and nodded to the side of the road. Dropping the carpet bag, he held up five fingers, telling them to take a rest.

All three dropped to sit on a small hummock.

Leaning forward, he passed the waterbag and whispered, "Four miles, you done good."

All three of them smiled in the darkness.

Standing, he stretched and looked off into the distance. The distant campfire had been allowed to die down to almost nothing. A cold chill ran down his back. If they caught them out here, there wasn't a thing he could do. Yes, he might take a few with him, but in the end, it wouldn't be enough.

Sighing, he picked up the bag, adjusted the saddlebags and waterskin on his shoulder then nodded they should start up again.

He was pleased to see there was no complaints. No pleading looks for a few more minutes. Good, they knew how dangerous this was.

Again, they started. As they walked, he repeatedly turned and looked back towards the far camp. Why he bothered he couldn't say. Any Indian they encountered would appear out of the darkness from any of a dozen different directions.

Twice more they stopped to rest. After everyone had a good drink, he hefted the bag and frowned. The last bit of their trip was going to be dry.

He crouched down so that he could see them eye to eye. "We're a little bit over halfway."

All three slumped with disappointment. He knew they had each hoped for more. But really, they had performed remarkably. Especially when you considered they'd walked seven miles to get to Wild China Pond.

"Can we talk now?" Amy whispered.

He quietly laughed; it must have been tearing her apart to remain so quiet for so long.

"Yes, we're a good ten miles away and have this small ridge between us and them. But no yelling. They may have already left their camp and be close. So just whispers. And only if it is important."

Amy nodded. Mary looked back at him with wide eyes. Is it really that dangerous she was silently asking him?

It pained him to do it, but he gave her a quiet nod confirming her worst fears.

Mary Rose focused on putting one foot in front of the other. Her back ached, her feet screamed in agony, and her eyes were scratchy from lack of sleep and all this dust. The tantalizing thought of a comfortable bed refused to go away. Or better yet, a warm bath and then a comfortable sleep.

One foot in front of the other, she told herself again.

As she walked, the reality of her situation finally hit her. No one knew she was walking through the desert at night being chased by Indians. Her uncle didn't know she and the others were coming. No one at home knew where she was going.

A lonely feeling washed over her. It was as if she had disappeared off the face of the earth. She could die at any moment, and no one would miss her. They wouldn't even know she had passed.

Pushing the feeling away, she draped an arm around Amy's shoulders as she gave her an encouraging smile. No, she wasn't going to let that happen. Neither herself nor her siblings would die, forgotten and alone. Not if she could stop it.

The moon had set, making the night even darker. Thankfully, there were so many stars they could still see enough to walk the trail. Looking up, she shook her head, had she ever seen such a sky? It must be the dry desert air she thought as she admired a long ribbon of stars overhead.

Of course, that meant the Indians could see them also.

Sighing to herself, she returned to focusing on putting one foot in front of the other.

Her mind was wandering when a rustling in the bushes just off the trail made her jump. Instantly she turned to Jake to find him with his pistol in his hand, staring into the darkness.

She and the others froze, ready to run. Her heart pounded in her chest as she held her breath waiting to know if they would live or die.

Then, as quick as lightning, a jack rabbit darted across the trail in front of them.

Jake smiled, shook his head, and holstered his pistol.

Mary let out a long breath, gave Amy a quick hug, and started her down the trail.

As they walked, she couldn't stop from thinking about the decisions she had made that had led them to this spot, this time. Refusing Brandon's demand of marriage. Coming to her uncle's when he told her not to. Even the decision to take the first stage instead of

spending a few extra days at Fort Worth.

A sick feeling of regret filled her until she glanced over at Jake. A sly smile crossed her lips. But then her decisions had led her to meet this man. Silly, but true. But she couldn't help but admit that there was a silver lining to their troubles.

Slowly, the black night began to turn gray in the east then gently slipped into pink. Once again, the darkness had been defeated. But the new light brought new danger. They were an even easier target and would soon be visible from a great distance.

A silence surrounded them. Even Amy didn't have the energy to talk. One foot in front of the other, she reminded herself.

Glancing over she noticed the empty water bag bouncing against Jake's side. How had he done it, she wondered. The man had walked close to sixty miles over the last three days. Yet his shoulders were unbowed as he continually scanned the area looking for threats.

"We're almost there," he said to them as he pointed to a distant gap in the mountains.

Mary Rose looked up to see a wide space between two peaks on a long mountain range. The night had hidden how close they had gotten.

Thomas, who was slightly ahead of them, froze, then slowly pointed.

Mary's heart slammed shut as she grabbed Amy and pulled her back. A six-foot rattlesnake slowly slithered across the trail. A tawny brown with wide diamonds down his back. It shook its tale creating a soft rattle sound that sent a shiver down her back. God, how many ways were there to die in this land?

"Don't move," Jake said as he drew his pistol and stepped up next to her brother. "Just let him go on his way and we'll go on ours."

Thomas nodded as he leaned forward just a little. Mary couldn't help but smile. So typical of her brother. He was studying the snake trying to learn instead of being afraid. Thankfully Jake was there to make sure he didn't get too close.

After the snake had slunk off into the bushes, Jake turned back to them with a quick smile and nodded up to the trail. Pointing to make sure they used the far edge away from where the snake had disappeared.

Her heart fell. She had hoped that they might relax for a bit, but it seemed that he was intent on them getting there as soon as possible. Obviously, he was still worried about being attacked.

After just a short way, the ground began to rise as they started up

the mountains. Once again, she lowered her head and focused on walking. Every muscle ached; her mouth was as dry as the desert around them. Her soul was yelling at her to stop and rest.

Instead, she took another step.

When the sun broke the horizon, Amy sighed as she looked at the pretty sunrise.

Mary turned to give her a quick smile when her foot rolled off a loose stone. Squealing, she fell to her knees as a sharp pain shot up from her ankle.

A sick feeling of despair filled her. What more could go wrong?

Jake dropped the carpet bag and handed his rifle to Thomas before he gave her a quick smile and slipped an arm under her knees and the other around her back to pick her up.

“What?” she gasped.

“Here,” he said as he gently set her down on a large boulder next to the trail. “Let me look at it.”

She could only stare back at him as he kneeled before her. There was something about a handsome man kneeling in front of her that sent her heart to racing.

He lifted an eyebrow, obviously waiting for her permission.

Biting her lip, she nodded as she slightly lifted her dress just an inch. Thank God her hose had no runs.

He bit his lip as he focused on carefully unlacing her boot then gently slipped it off her foot.

Her spine shivered as his strong hands cupped her foot then slowly worked up over her ankle and then finally up her calf. Oh, what a feeling, she thought as she closed her eyes and let herself enjoy this moment.

His hand shifted and a sharp pain shot up her leg making her wince.

She looked down into his eyes as she fought to not let him see the pain. But she had obviously failed when she saw him shake his head.

“Hold on,” he told her as his fingers gently surrounded her ankle.

The pain fell into a dull throb but at the same time, she couldn’t ignore the strange feeling that filled her at his touch.

“It ain’t broken,” he said with a quick smile.

Biting her lip, she nodded as a sudden desire filled her. A need to be held by this man. To kiss him until the world went away.

Their eyes locked as she became lost in his gaze. The two of them continued to stare at each other until Amy’s giggle broke the moment.

Suddenly, her cheeks grew hot. What must he think? A simple touch and she became a silly schoolgirl.

Mary frowned at her sister, but a quick sense of shame flashed through her when she saw that the girl recognized the truth. Her big sister was smitten.

Chapter Eight

Jake pushed away the urge to curse a blue streak. They were so close, and he had been a fool to push them so hard. But they had been holding up so well. He was proud of them. Especially this woman in front of him. She had kept her poise throughout the night. No complaints, no wishing things were different. Instead, putting her head down and pushing forward.

But then, he shouldn't have been surprised. He had seen it in the fight with the Comanche, shooting at that brave. She was just instinctively tough. Unusual for someone so pretty.

A deep anger filled him at the thought of this woman being injured. Hurt because of his mistakes. It just didn't sit well.

"I'm going to have to put the boot back on," he said to her.

She bit her lip as she nodded.

Gently, he worked the boot back onto her foot, cringing every time she winced. He could tell she was trying hard to hide it, but the pain was too much to ignore.

Once it was on and laced, he had to remind himself to let go of her leg. It was such a pretty leg, and he was a man. A thousand thoughts flashed through his mind.

"Can you stand?"

She nodded as she rested a hand on his shoulder and gingerly stood up trying to put weight on her injured leg.

He watched her closely.

Sighing heavily, she gave a quick smile then started to walk to the next station.

His heart swelled with pride. She was going to tough it out. But then she faltered and almost fell.

"Here," he said as he scooped her up into his arms. "We'll make better time if I just carry you."

She looked up at him with frightened eyes. As if the thought of being held by him might be worse than being caught by the Indians.

"Jake ..." she started to say.

"Trust me," he replied. Then turning to Tommy, he told the boy to give the rifle to his sister and for him to take the bag.

"Amy, you keep your fingers off that trigger. It don't got a round chambered. But you treat it like it does. You hear?"

The little girl's eyes grew very big as she took the rifle from her brother. But he saw that she had accepted her responsibility with

seriousness.

“Let’s go,” he said as he started up the hill, jostling Mary just a little to get her to fit better in his arms. Looking down, he couldn’t help but smile at her as she continued to stare up at him with pure fear.

“Jake, I can walk, I promise.”

“Maybe we’ll see in a bit.”

She frowned but then she put her hands up around his neck and sighed heavily.

He couldn’t tell if it was a sound of frustration or happiness. But really, it didn’t matter. He needed to get her up this mountain before the Indians found them. They were already hours behind schedule. He had hoped to get them there before sun up.

As he walked, he could feel his strength ebbing away. It had been a long few days. That walk in from losing his horse had tapped a lot of his energy. Now this hike. He could feel it seeping out of him like a bucket that sprung a leak. He needed to get these people somewhere safe. Somewhere he could relax without having to worry about waking up dead.

“Jake,” Mary said as she looked up into his eyes. “That scar, on your neck, behind your ear. Where did you get it?”

He frowned down at her, “That’s a bit personal, don’t you think?”

She laughed. “I am being carried across a desert by a man I barely know. Besides, people who have been in an Indian attack together should be able to ask personal questions.”

Laughing at her he shook his head. “Believe it or not, my nephew, Esau, gave it to me. Bit me.”

“What?”

“Yeah, he was about three and we was rough housing on the floor. You know, wrestling and stuff and he didn’t like losing. He’s Zion’s oldest boy, must be twelve by now, and he hates losing as much as his father. So, he bit me.”

Her eyes grew big as he told the story.

“It weren’t real bad, but it got infected and Hannah had to cut into it.”

“Hannah?”

“My sister, Zion’s wife, and that little terror’s mother. She does the people fixing in our parts. She’s even better than my father was and he was trained at one of them eastern schools of medicine.”

The girl in his arms thought for a moment. “I think you also

mentioned a brother.”

“Luke. And his wife Rebecca. They met on the trail out from Ohio as kids. But got separated for about ten years. But after the war, Luke tracked her down. They built themselves a house right near Zion and Hannah.”

“On a horse ranch?”

“Yeah, the east side of the cascades. The prettiest little valley you ever did see.”

Her brow narrowed as she thought about what he had said. He shifted again; his arms were beginning to feel like tree stumps.

“Jake, I really do think I can walk.”

He continued on without acknowledging her.

“If I can’t walk, then you can carry me. Please!”

He smiled down at her, “What, you don’t like resting in my arms?”

Mary’s cheeks flushed pink as she quickly looked away. But before she did, she saw something strange in her eyes. Something that could have meant a thousand different things, but he’d never been good at reading women. They were a mystery to him.

Finally, she looked back up at him, “No, that’s not it. I just think you can put me down.”

Laughing, he nodded ahead. “Ain’t no need. We are almost there.”

Mary twisted to see and sighed inside. There, at the top of the pass, a quarter mile away were several stone buildings and a dusty road running between it and a rock corral. Everything looked as it should, she realized with relief. No burnt roofs, no desolation. A man was feeding the horses. Smoke rose from a small fireplace next to the building.

“We made it,” Amy yelled as she turned to them with a huge smile.

Mary slumped in Jake’s arms and closed her eyes. They would be safe, they would live. Her brother and sister would not be taken as slaves. Or worse, killed on the spot.

Jake jostled her again as he shifted his grip. A warm sense of safety and security flowed through her. This man had saved them. Even now, he was carrying her across the desert. God, she could lay in his arms for the rest of her life.

“Thank you,” she said to him, giving him a small smile. “For saving us.”

He frowned for a moment as if he had difficulty understanding her comment. As if saving strangers was perfectly normal.

She returned to looking at their destination. The man feeding the stock saw them approaching and immediately grabbed his rifle before calling over his shoulder to the house.

It was obvious why the Indians hadn’t attacked this station. Hemmed in by the mountains, there would be no mobility and would require direct assault. When three armed men rushed out of the house it only confirmed her insight. A young Mexican boy and two women followed them out.

As they drew closer, she felt Jake almost stumble. The man must be close to collapsing, she realized.

“Put me down Jake,” she insisted.

He studied her for a moment then sighed as he gently lowered her to stand on her own feet.

Tentatively she tried walking, holding onto his arm for support. Slowly, they walked to the station, her more hopping than a dignified walk. But with each step, she was reminded of what she had lost. Those arms had felt so comforting. Making her feel special.

“You from the stage?” the stockman asked as he stepped forward to greet them.

Jake nodded, “Seven miles the other side of Wild China Pond,

they hit it also.”

“We got word last night,” the stockman said with a heavy sigh as he nodded to the young Mexican boy. “Their boy, Juan, he was up at the water hole in the rocks. He waited until the Comanche left. Ran all the way here to give us word.”

Mary’s heart dropped. Only one boy had escaped. Everyone else had been killed or taken. And imagine, a boy the same age as Thomas running all alone through the desert.

“We need to get word to the army,” Jake said.

“Sent a rider after Juan came in. Didn’t see the need to send anyone out to check on the stage until the army got here. Thought the stage was done for.

“The stage yes, but not the rest of us. Not quite,” Jake told the man as he reached over and took his rifle from Amy. “If’n you got rooms. These people could use a rest. It has been a bit of a walk.”

“Of course,” he said before turning and issuing orders.

Mary Rose let herself be guided and taken care of. Two women from the station, sisters if she was any judge, stepped forward to help her and the children into the station.

“I’m Emily Simpson, and this is my sister Kate, My John runs the station. That was him you was talking to.”

Mary Rose could only smile and nod as a wave of fatigue washed over her. After that, things became a blur. Water, cool, beautiful water, followed by breakfast, eggs, and beans, and then she and the others were ushered into a small side room with a large bed.

“This is the driver’s room,” Mrs. Simpson told them. “When they’re waiting to swap out with another set. I’ve changed the bedding.”

Mary barely had time to mutter a quick thank you before she fell onto the bed, asleep before her head hit the pillow.

Waking later, she discovered herself under the covers, her boots off and her ankle wrapped in bandages. Turning quickly, she saw both Amy and Thomas on the other bed, Thomas with his arm around his sister, holding her close.

Her heart swelled with love. She was so proud of them. They had done it. Survived.

Immediately, she thought of Jake. Where was he? Her insides clenched at the thought of him already leaving. He wanted to track his target. Had he already gotten a horse and left on his primary task?

Hobbling to the door on bare feet she opened it to find the main room with one of the women wiping down a table.

“Jake? Mr. Parker?” she asked as she held her breath.

The woman looked up with a deep frown. “Asleep in the barn. And if he’s anything like my man. He’s snoring enough to wake the dead. I swear, if you listen close, you could probably hear it all the way from here.”

Mary let out a long breath as a sense of pure relief filled her. He hadn’t left without saying goodbye. Suddenly, she was filled with a need to see him. Just to make sure he was alright. That insistent type of feeling that could not be ignored. Not if she was to rest easy.

Hopping back to her bed she unwrapped her foot, the swelling wasn’t too bad, she would be able to get her boot back on. Once ready, she glanced over to find Amy watching her.

“I’ll be right back,” she whispered to her sister.

Amy smiled. “Tell Mr. Parker hi for me.”

Mary’s stomach dropped. Was it that obvious? But she pushed away the fear bubbling inside of her and hurried as fast as her injured foot would allow.

Once outside, she shielded her eyes to glance at the setting sun. They had slept through the day. As she limped to the barn, she couldn’t stop from chastising herself. She was rushing to see a man who was going to disappear soon. He was going to ride away from them and never return.

A sick feeling of despair filled her, but still, she couldn’t stop. She needed to know that he was well. Even more, she needed to know that he was still there.

Stepping into the barn, she froze, his saddlebag lay in a large pile of empty straw with the indentation of a tall man.

A sound off to the side made her twirl to find the most shocking sight in her life. Tall Jake Parker, standing without his shirt, bent over a bowl of water as he pulled a razor through the soap on his jaw, a polished piece of steel for a mirror.

He raised an eyebrow, obviously surprised to see her.

She couldn’t help herself from letting her eyes roam over his wide shoulders, across his broad chest, a line of dark hair traveling down to his belt.

He was so ... so male.

Gulping twice, she tried to force herself to look away, but froze, unable to do what she should

Smiling, he said, “You look rested, Mary Rose. As pretty as ever.”

Her insides melted as she came to realize just how much she loved

this man. A man who was going to walk out of her life.

Every bit of common sense warned her. A thousand talks from her mother. Every story whispered after church with her friends. Never fall in love with an adventurer. That way only led to heartache.

But it was too late. She realized. It had probably been too late the first time she saw him walking in from the desert. A tall lean cowboy that pulled at her soul. Two days was all it took, and this man had captured her heart.

Chapter Nine

Jake stared at the girl staring at him. His gut tightened, God she was so beautiful. A whisp of hair had escaped and tickled the top of her pert little ear. But it was her deep blue eyes that captured him, holding him in place.

Taking a deep breath, he shook off the need and want filling him. He had a mission to accomplish. Find Ian's killer and go home. A pretty woman could not be allowed to get in his way.

"Talked to Simpson," he said to her as he returned to scraping the soap from his jaw. "He said we can borrow a wagon, turn it in at the Fort Stockton station."

"Is it safe?" she asked as her eyes narrowed with concern.

Shrugging his shoulders, he shook his head, "Probably not. We can wait for the soldiers if you want. Might be a day or two."

She paused for a moment as she turned to look back out the barn door at the distant desert. "What do you think we should do?"

After wiping his face with a rough towel, he returned his straight razor and tin of soap to his bag and retrieved his shirt from the peg. "I think it would be best if we waited."

Her entire body relaxed as if he had said exactly what she wanted to hear. His insides struggled to remain calm. He was making a mistake. Every day Burk was getting farther away. He could leave her and the children to the stage line. They were their responsibility after all. There were several saddle horses he could buy, but his gut refused to let him do what he knew was right.

Instead. It insisted he make sure these people reached their destination. He didn't know exactly when they had become his responsibility, maybe it was the Indian fight. Or sometime during the long walk across the desert.

It didn't really matter.

Slipping on his shirt he turned his back to tuck it into his pants then buckled his gun belt before making sure both pistols rested easy in their holsters.

"Do you really need those here?" she asked, pointing to his guns. "I thought we were safe."

He gave her a quick smile. "Feel half naked without them."

Her cheeks blushed for some unknown reason before she took a deep breath and started back for the station. "I need to check on Amy and Thomas."

Slapping his hat on his head, he watched her walk away, admiring

the swing of her hips and cursing himself and Burk.

“Here,” he said as he hurried to catch up with her, slipping her arm into his. “You shouldn’t be putting weight on that leg.”

She faltered for a moment then looked up into his eyes and for the briefest moment, he wondered what it would be like to kiss her. Right there between the barn and the station in broad daylight.

The two of them didn’t move. Both frozen in time. Without thinking, he started to lean forward when the slamming of the station door broke through his fuddled brain.

Gulping, he pulled back. Mrs. Simpson stood there with her arms folded, shooting him a disgusted look. His heart jumped at his foolishness. He had almost shamed this woman. How stupid could a man be? A woman like Mary Rose McCain did not kiss drifting cowboys in the middle of the yard.

“Let’s get you inside and that foot up,” he said, the moment lost.

She looked back at him with a hurt frown then let him help her into the station.

Mrs. Simpson stepped aside to let them pass then followed them into the station. “Dinner will be ready in a few. You might want to wake them young’uns.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Simpson,” Mary told the woman then hurried to the back room to get her brother and sister. At the last moment, she paused at the door and looked back at him with a strange, unfathomable look.

No, he told himself for the hundredth time, this was not a woman for him. Besides, he had a man that needed killing.

Mary spent the remainder of that evening forcing herself not to think about Jake Parker. It was of course an impossibility. But she tried nonetheless.

Of course. He was a hard man to ignore. She still couldn't forget the sight of him shaving, shirtless. Lean muscles looking harder than oak.

And the way he looked at her sometimes, it sent her stomach to shivering with a strange hope. Could he feel anything for her? Anything like what she felt for him.

No, it was impossible. But there had been that moment in the yard when she had felt for sure he was about to kiss her. She had been kissed before, twice in fact. Both times behind the school where she had allowed boys to steal a kiss.

Both times had been interesting. But she knew deep in her soul that a kiss by Jake Parker would be much more than interesting.

Yet, he had backed away. Why? Had it been Mrs. Simpson's arrival. Surely, he wasn't afraid of the judgement of the station master's wife. This was a man who fought off a band of Comanche all by himself. A man who had carried her for miles through the desert. No, surely, he was afraid of nothing.

Why then? Had he come to his sense and decided that this woman wasn't worth his effort. That she, Mary Rose McCain was not what he wanted.

The next morning after breakfast she found herself alone with nothing to do. Amy was helping husk corn that had been taken from the small garden out back with Mrs. Simpson's sister Kate. Thomas was off with Juan on some adventure, but they had both promised to stay close.

Jake had informed the group that he thought he'd climb the nearest peak and take a look out over the country. She had been surprised when no one ridiculed him or thought it a waste of time.

He gave her a quick nod then grabbed his rifle and left her there alone.

A sadness filled her as she realized this was what she would be feeling always after he was gone. This empty hole that could not be filled.

Unable to sit still, she stepped outside, raised a hand to shield her eyes as she watched Jake climb up through the rocks. Disappearing only to show up again a little higher. Her heart raced with worry when he jumped from one boulder to another.

God, the man really was like a mountain lion, she thought.

Emily Simpson stepped out of the station and joined her in watching Jake. "You be careful, dear. That one there is a killer if I ever seen one."

Mary's heart lurched. How dare this woman say anything bad about Jake? If not for him, they would surely have perished a dozen times over. "I believe you are mistaken, Mrs. Simpson. Jake is a good man."

The older woman scoffed. "Didn't say he weren't. But that don't change who he is. Not deep down. It's the eyes. I can always tell."

Mary bit down on the inside of her cheek to stop from snapping back at the woman. But she knew she was mistaken. But a thought refused to be ignored. Why was Jake here? He was tracking a man. What was he going to do with him when he caught him?

"I am sure you are wrong," she said, closing the argument.

Mrs. Simpson dropped her hand and turned to her. "A man like that. He won't settle down. There will always be another mountain to cross or another man to chase after. Besides, a man don't wear two guns unless he thinks he's going to need them. And one won't be enough."

Mary's heart ached when she realized the woman was probably right. But she refused to give the woman the pleasure of thinking she had won. "Regardless, Mrs. Simpson, we are just two people traveling in the same direction. When I get to Fort Stockton. We will go to my uncle's. And Jake Parker will go where he wishes. What is it to me?"

The woman smiled knowingly and shook her head.

Mary watched her turn back into the station. A dozen memories of talks with her mother flashed through her mind. Warnings, much like Mrs. Simpsons. Find a steady man. Her mother had drilled into her. A man who will be there every morning. A man who won't risk his family's happiness on wild schemes. A man who won't chase after shiny new things.

Lifting a hand again, she watched as Jake stood atop the highest peak and stared off into the distance.

Who was he? Deep down? She knew nothing about him. Not really. Was Mrs. Simpson, right? A doubt filled her. She was losing her head over a man who would be gone soon. A man who she barely knew. Was there anything more foolish than a woman who couldn't see the truth?

Sighing, she pushed the angst and worry aside and tried to accept the fact that it didn't matter. Mr. Jake Parker was not interested in her

and there wasn't a thing she could do about it.

She would just have to live with that reality, she thought as she went back into the station. A reality that was going to eat at her for the rest of her life, she feared.

It was almost evening when Jake returned. Stepping into the station, her heart hurt just looking at him. Tall, strong, with those eyes that never missed a detail.

"Army's out," he said, beating his hat against his leg to clear it of the dust. "Bivouacking about ten miles south. They'll be here in the morning."

So soon? Once again, she was reminded that she would lose him.

Mrs. Simpson nodded to a table for him to sit but he ignored the station master's wife and joined her and her siblings before cocking an eyebrow and silently asking to be served his dinner.

Mary's insides jumped with happiness just being near him.

As he tucked into his dinner he reached over and ruffled Thomas's hair. "So, Tommy. Saw you and Juan tracking that rabbit, you almost had him by the cliff, but he zigged and you two zagged."

Her brother smiled sheepishly then shrugged.

It was then that Mary realized she hadn't seen Thomas with a book in his hands at all that day. Since when did her brother try and track rabbits? "Why do you call him Tommy," she said to Jake. "His name is Thomas."

Before Jake could respond, her brother frowned at her and said, "I prefer Tommy. Or better yet Tom."

Her stomach clenched. What had happened to her brother? He never back talked her and why this? Why now? "What is wrong with Thomas? It is a good name."

The boy looked down at his dinner then back up and frowned at her. "In all of history. Have you ever heard of a hero named Thomas?"

She rocked back, surprised at the question. "What about Thomas Aquinas, Jefferson, Paine."

Her brother laughed. "Those were scholars. Not heroes."

What was happening? she wondered. Since when had her brother changed.

Next to her, Jake shrugged. "A man's got a right to be called what he wants. Tom, it is."

An anger began to build inside of her as she turned on Jake and said. "You are leaving in few days. I would appreciate it if you would ... I don't know. Just stay out of our lives." With those hurtful words,

she jumped up and raced to her room before he could see her cry.

As she ran away, she just knew in her heart that he was frowning at her. Disappointed in her ungratefulness. But she didn't care. It hurt too much. It, everything, life itself was a mixed-up bundle of emotions and none of them felt right.

Chapter Ten

Mary was repacking the carpet bag the next morning as she tried to forget the awful example, she had shown last night. Rushing from the diner table before she could begin to cry. Jake must have thought her a real ninny.

Amy stepped into the room, lifting an eyebrow, silently asking if her sister was alright.

Mary Rose gave her a quick reassuring smile then returned to the bag. "I've set aside our best clothes for when we arrive at Uncles."

Her sister nodded. "What will it be like? His ranch? Do you think it will be far from town?"

"I don't know," Mary answered as she turned so that her sister would not see the tear forming at the corner of her eye. It didn't really matter about the ranch. The important fact was that Jake Parker would not be there.

Gritting her teeth, she focused on just getting through the next moment when a voice called from the front room, "Hey, the army's coming in."

Both she and Amy spun to race from the room. Stepping outside, Mary made sure to join the group on the far side from Jake. Being too close to him just hurt too much. Of course, that didn't stop her from sneaking a look to see if he had noticed her choosing to be separate from him.

He stood straight and tall, his hat pulled low to shield his eyes from the morning sun.

The entire group watched as two long columns of blue uniformed men road into the station. Her heart soared. They looked so formidable. Each with a side arm and a rifle in a saddle scabbard. Tall, strong men.

Not as tall, nor as strong as Jake of course. But more than adequate of protecting them from a band of Indians.

A young man at the front of the columns lifted a gloved hand and yelled, "Hoaaa!" The entire troop came to a halt, horses stomping and shuffling.

Mary couldn't help but be impressed with their precision.

The young man, an officer she believed, handed his reins to his sergeant then swung down from his horse, the sword on his hip jingled. He was so young, not much older than herself, she thought with surprise.

"Ladies," he said with a crispness as he tipped his head.

“Gentleman. I am lieutenant Stapleton. Your rider found us on patrol. Said there has been problems with the Indians.”

Mary’s heart jumped. He said that as if it were all their fault. That if they hadn’t antagonized them, there wouldn’t have been an issue and he wouldn’t have to spend two days riding.

She also noticed that he gave her a quick side glance. Again, the look of a man aware of a woman. A quick appraisal. She thought perhaps she noticed approval. Enough men had looked at her over the years, she had long ago learned that look.

She watched as the four other men glanced at Jake, silently saying that it was his story to tell.

Jake stepped forward, looking down at the officer. Mary couldn’t help but compare them. The young officer in his uniform. Articulate, handsome in a refined way. If she had to guess, she would say he came from wealth. Something about the way he stood, as if he had every right to be admired and listened to.

Next to him was Jake Parker. Rough. With creases around his eyes from too many days staring at far distances. A man with two guns on his hips and a look in his eyes that let a person know that he knew how to use them. A tough, rough, man with sharp eyes.

Her heart melted. There was no comparison. Jake would always be her model of a man.

“Jake Parker,” he said as way of introduction, “Out of Oregon.”

Mary caught an interest from the Sergeant holding the lieutenant’s horse. He was like a sheepdog who had noticed something new and different.

She also noticed the two men facing each other bristled like two rams ready to slam into each other.

Jake continued, “Noticed a band of Comanche southwest of Big Springs about five days ago. Caught the stage out of Llano Estacada along with Miss McCain and her brother and sister, Tom and Amy.”

Her sister blushed with pleasure at being the center of attention.

Lieutenant Stapleton nodded as he glanced again at Mary Rose.

Mary noticed Jake’s jaw tighten for some unknown reason. Just a hint of anger that he quickly put aside and resumed, “There was another man. Barstow, the driver, and guard. They hit us halfway between the stations.”

The officer nodded, “Smart, far from any assistance.”

“The other three died during the attack. We buried them as best we could, next to the overturned stage. I set the horses free and the Indians took out after them. Think I got two or three of them. One of

them dead for sure.”

Mary gasped; she hadn't known he had actually killed one of their attackers.

The young officer frowned, as if he would never have let those other men die. No, if he had been in charge, the Indians would never have attacked.

Mary stepped forward before she could stop herself. “Mr. Parker is being too modest. He kept a dozen Indians away from us. Risked his life to free the horses, then got us to safety. When we got to Wild China Pond. Everyone was gone. It was obvious that they had been attacked and carried off.”

Reaching back, she pushed Juan out front. “Juan escaped, then ran through the desert all night to warn this station.”

The lieutenant looked down at the boy, then nodded respectfully. Accepting the heroic effort.

Only because she had drawn closer did she hear the grumble in Jake's voice, “We come through the night to this place and have been waiting for you lot to arrive to escort us into Fort Stockton.”

The young officer frowned. “Well, you'll be going on without escort. I have my orders to find these Indians and bring them to justice.”

Jake snorted then shook his head, “Lieutenant, that there is a big country. And they know every nook and cranny. You could hide an army out there. Let alone two dozen Comanche braves. You won't be finding them unless they want to be found.”

The officer frowned then said, “regardless, I have my orders.”

“Excuse me,” the sergeant said to Jake. “Sergeant Kennedy. Would you be Luke Parker's brother? I heard he went back to Oregon.”

Jake's eyes opened wide as he nodded.

The sergeant smiled, “Thought so, you look like him. We served together in the war. Best officer I ever done seen.”

Mary couldn't help but notice the young lieutenant frown. Obviously displeased with the comparison.

The sergeant turned to his commander and said, “Lieutenant, you might want to rethink them orders. The colonel won't be too happy if anything happened to these people. Colonel Forrest always admired Luke Parker. Set him up high, he did.”

“Colonel Forrest is the commander at Fort Stockton?” Jake asked in surprise. “He escorted us on the Oregon Trail. I will have to stop and see him. Luke said they served together.”

The young lieutenant frowned, obviously unhappy at having his orders questioned.

Mary held her breath. An escort significantly improved their chance of survival.

Letting out a long breath, the young man nodded and said, "I will send two ..."

"I'd recommend four, lieutenant," the sergeant interjected.

"Very well, four men. To escort you to Fort Stockton. Cut them out sergeant and have them report to Colonel Forrest what these people have said."

"Yes sir," the sergeant said as he saluted then turned to ride down the columns and select four men.

The young officer then turned to Mary and smiled. She knew that look of interest in a young man's eyes. A look she would have normally welcomed. But after meeting and coming to know Jake. She knew that such a look would never have the pull on her it as once would have.

"Miss McCain," he said as he removed his hat. "I do hope you will allow me to call on you when I return. I will worry until I know that you have arrived safely."

Jake snorted softly then turned away.

Mary felt a burst of hope deep inside. Was Jake jealous? Oh, please, please, let it be so. Seeing her opportunity, she smiled at the young man and said, "Of course Lieutenant. That would be lovely."

Jake scoffed as he marched to the corral to begin gathering two horses to pull the wagon.

"Until then," the young lieutenant said as he bowed slightly, gave her a quick smile then returned to his horse. Mounting, he turned back, gave her a jaunty smile. Then raised his hand, motioned forward, and with that, the army columns were off.

Mary shielded her eyes as she watched them disappear around the bend.

"Such a handsome man," Miss Simpson said as she stepped up next to Mary. "And an army officer. You can always depend on a man like that."

Mr. Simpson cursed under his breath and spat into the dirt. "Never did like them blues. Killed too many of my friends at Shiloh."

"Oh, Mr. Simpson," she said as she patted his arm. "The war was over long ago."

"Six years ain't long enough if'n you ask me."

Mary ignored them as she turned to watch Jake hitch up the wagon. One more step closer to losing him, she realized. One step closer to heartbreak.

Jake cursed as he backed the horses up to the wagon. The little popinjay. Mind if I call on you! Who talks like that? Besides, the boy was fresh out of some school somewhere. He wouldn't have a chance against the Comanche. Their youngest brave knew more about tactics and strategy than that boy would learn in a lifetime.

And the way Mary had looked at him. Wide-eyed, as if she was seeing some prince at one of them fancy dances back east.

His gut twisted into knots as he tried to push it aside. Mary had every right to find a man like that attractive. Handsome, an officer, A man with a future. Not some traveling cowboy hopping from one adventure to the next.

Hooking the chains to the cross beam, he cursed again and stomped back to the barn to get his things. The four soldiers sat their horses, silently waiting.

"If you're going, better hurry," he yelled across the yard to Mary.

She looked at him with wide eyes, obviously unaware of what she had done to make him so grumpy. That was the thing about women. They never understood how silly they could be making eyes at some idiot. Couldn't she see the man would be wrong for her?

She'd end up walking all over him. She was obviously more intelligent, much too pretty, and was just too plain good for a man like that.

But then, he thought. Wasn't that true of just about every man he knew. None of them would be good enough for someone like Mary Rose McCain.

Mary's brow furrowed as she stared at Jake's back. Why was he mad at her? Men! she would never understand them.

"Let us hurry," Mary said to her siblings. "It appears that Mr. Parker is in a bit of a rush."

"I'll get you some food," Mrs. Simpson said as she hurried inside. "Three days worth I would imagine."

"Thank you, Mrs. Simpson," Mary said. "And thank you for having us. We would have been lost without you."

The older woman nodded, then turned and looked at Jake as he wrestled the horses into place. "You be careful dear. A man like that. He's too much man to hold onto."

Mary scoffed then smiled. It was impossible to imagine too much man. Especially in a land like this. "I wouldn't worry, Mrs. Simpson. Mr. Parker finds me too irritating."

The Stationmaster's wife shook her head then looked at her husband. "A man likes being irritated by a woman. Lets him know he's alive. That, and keeps him on his toes."

Her husband laughed then pulled his wife into a quick hug and kissed the top of her head. "But only if she's pretty. A pretty woman can irritate a man all she wants, and he don't mind."

His wife blushed as she leaned into him for just a second then remembered where she was and said, "I'll be getting that food."

Mary couldn't help but ache inside. Would she ever know such love? A love based on years of shared experiences. A love between a man and a woman that could not be broken no matter what the world threw at them.

Glancing over her shoulder, she sighed when she realized that Jake Parker was not interested in such a life. He was much more interested in the next exciting thing over the next mountain.

No, the one man she knew she would love for the rest of her life didn't have the same dream as hers, and as a result. She knew she would never be as happy as she should be.

Chapter Eleven

Gritting her teeth, Mary Rose grabbed the sideboard to hang on as the wagon bounced down the road. The stage had been so much more comfortable. A sudden memory of the three dead men flashed into her mind making her feel guilty for complaining. Things could be so much worse. Besides, at least they weren't walking.

Glancing over at Jake she could only shake her head. Yes, things could be worse. He might have died there and be buried next to those other men.

Jake drove, she sat next to him on the hard bench, Tom and Amy were in the back with the carpetbag and the food Mrs. Simpson had given them. Two soldiers road ahead of the wagon a good twenty yards. The other two behind by the same distance.

A hot dry wind made the air taste of dust. In the far distance, a buzzard circled looking for something dead. Surely in this land, it would not take the bird long, she thought to herself.

An awkward silence sat between them like a brick wall. The kind of silence that ate at her soul. Full of pain and regret.

She couldn't help but remember the way Jake had looked at her the previous day. When she had thought he might kiss her. The thought made her stomach shiver with hope.

"How long will it take?" she asked, desperate to break the silence.

Jake shrugged. "It will take us a day to Horse Head Crossing on the Pecos River. Another to Comanche Springs, and a third to Fort Stockton. If the army hadn't already been out on patrol, it would have taken another two days for them to get to us."

She sighed. "Everything is so far apart. It seems like this road goes on forever. The land is flat, dry, and you couldn't grow a potato if your life depended on it. Why do people live out here?"

He laughed, "Probably because everything is so far apart. They like that distance."

Mary frowned. And now she would be one of them.

"Well, at least we don't have to worry about an Indian attack," she said indicating the soldiers.

Jake scoffed and shook his head. "From what I hear, the Comanche have been known to attack groups ten times larger than us lot. It all depends on their wants and if they think they can get away with it. That lieutenant made a mistake. But there ain't no telling an idiot when he's wrong."

Mary shuddered. Would she and her siblings ever be safe? That

thought was immediately followed by an awareness of the anger in Jake's voice. Was he angry about the decision or the fact that a young man had smiled at her?

No that was impossible.

Again, the awkward silence fell over them. Reminding her of just how much she didn't know about this man. There was something about those wide shoulders, strong hands on the reins, and the set of his eyes that just made her insides turn over. But what about him. His dreams, hopes, perspective. What did she really know?

It was going to be a long three days if this uncomfortableness continued. She looked back hoping to engage either Tom or Amy in conversation. Anything to break the rising awkwardness. But both of them were lost in their own world. Tom had broken out his one and only book. Amy was playing with her doll. No, she wouldn't be able to use her siblings.

Sighing, she turned to look off into the distance and tried to forget the tall man next to her.

"So," Jake said, breaking the silence. "Why ain't a pretty girl like you married with a passel of young'uns of her own."

Her heart hitched, that was a rather personal question. Even for two people who had been through what they had experienced. And how was a woman supposed to answer such a question? If she said she had never met the right man, she sounded haughty. If she said no one had asked, she sounded less than desirable.

Instead, she looked at the man next to her and decided she wanted to share the truth. "There was a man in Ohio, Brandon Brooks."

Jake glanced over at her, silently encouraging her to tell him more.

"I discovered he was not a good man."

"Idiot, if you ask me," Jake said with a smile.

Her heart swelled. He hadn't judged her. Instead, he had accepted her assessment. Suddenly, it all bubbled out. The stories about Brandon. His violence and anger. How she and her siblings slipped away in the night so he wouldn't even know they were gone.

He studied her for a moment then said, "Well, if this person shows up in these parts. You point him out to me and I'll take him down a peg or two for you. A man dumb enough to scare you off don't deserve to breathe."

She laughed. The thought of Brandon being confronted by Jake was silly. Oh, how she would like to see the man face someone stronger than him. Somehow, she knew that deep in his heart,

Brandon was a coward. Carefully selecting victims that could not fight back.

Such would not be the case if Jake confronted him.

“No family nearby?” Jake asked with obvious concern.

“No. Just my mother’s brother here in West Texas.”

He grimaced then said, “I ain’t never not known about having a family. Even when I was off in the California gold fields, or chasing mustangs in Montana. I always knew Zion and Hannah were home. The one place in this world they couldn’t throw me out.”

Smiling, she thought about how comforting that must be. Having a base. A solid foundation.

“Growing up wasn’t so easy,” she told him. And with those simple words, the entire story spilled out. How her mother had fought to hold things together as her father chased dream after dream. The constant moving. The embarrassment of services being refused because of unpaid bills. The looks of disdain from the other women. All of it came bubbling out.

When she was finished, she let out a long sigh. God, it felt so liberating to finally tell that story. She had held the pain so tight for so long that just talking about it had been like lifting a great weight from her shoulders.

Neither Thomas, Tom nor Amy had ever really known the truth. Their mother had shielded them the best she could.

Biting her lip, she glanced over at Jake only to find him staring off into the distance.

“Makes me more appreciative,” he said to her. “Life was never easy, But the one thing I always knew was that I was cared for by good people.”

A silence settled over them again, but this time she didn’t feel the awkwardness. Instead, she felt the beginning of a friendship. She had shared and not been judged. Really, a person couldn’t ask for much more.

“Tell me about your family,” she said as a sudden desire to know everything about this man filled her.

He laughed then told her all about his sister and the mountain man she married. About losing his father on the trek to Oregon. His brother going off to war then returning to help the girl he had loved since he was a child.

“Is that where you were a deputy,” she asked, remembering what had been said at the first station.

He nodded, “Silver Creek. Northern Nevada. But he and Rebecca

moved to be near Hannah and Zion.”

She thought about how idyllic it all sounded. Surrounded by family. People you could trust and rely upon. A prosperous ranch. Would it be like that at her uncle’s she wondered?

“But, what about you? You mentioned traveling.”

Again, he laughed as he started telling her stories about California and driving a herd of horses to Montana. Stories filled with adventure and new experiences. The kinds of things a man wanted in life. Especially a man like Jake Parker.

Her heart hurt when she realized just how different they were. She wanted stability, security. He wanted new, different.

“It sounds like an interesting life,” she said.

He glanced over at her then shrugged. “Maybe, but I ain’t building anything. If that makes any sense.”

Again, her heart jumped. Was he starting to look at life differently?

She was about to ask when the soldiers pulled up and said that it was time to water the horses.

The moment was gone she realized. But things had changed between them, she was sure of it. There was no longer that unknown. No, she felt as if she knew him more than she had.

He was funny, she realized as she thought back to his stories. Each of them had contained funny episodes, often at its own expense. No, this was a man sure in who he was. Pointing out his funny mishaps did not detract from who he was. A confident, competent man who met the world head on and wasn’t afraid to laugh at himself.

When they were preparing to start up again after watering the horses, Tom asked if he could sit up front.

Jake laughed, “You sit up here, you’ll have to be the driver. I feel a nap coming on.”

Tom’s eyes grew big as he looked at Mary then back at Jake. “Can I? Really?”

They let the boy sit in the middle as Jake showed him how to hold the reins, slipping them between his fingers to better have a feel for what the horses wanted.

Mary couldn’t help but smile as her brother’s chest expanding and his forehead narrowed in concentration. He loved learning new things.

Looking over his head, she gave Jake a smile of thanks. Spending time with Tom, teaching him was so important. Suddenly she realized just how good of a father this man would be. Gentle, when possible,

but firm when necessary.

A sharp pain shot through her when she realized how she wished this man could be the father of her children.

Their eyes met again as she fought to stop from declaring her love for him.

As if seeing something that made him afraid, he quickly looked away then focused on Tom.

“Give them a soft slap of the reins and tell them to Get On. They know what to do and they won’t drift off this road. So, it don’t get much easier.”

Tom nodded then did as he was told. The horses leaned into their harness and Tom’s smiled from ear to ear.

“Wake me if you have any problems,” Jake said as he pulled his hat down, folded his arms across his chest, and leaned back.

A quick sadness filled her as she realized that they would no longer be talking. No longer sharing secrets.

As if reading her mind, he glanced at her from beneath his hat brim and shrugged. Was it possible that he also regretted the loss?

She studied him as his body gently rocked with the shifting of the wagon. Oh, how she loved this man. There could be no doubt. Everything about him made her feel alive. Every look, laugh, or frown hit her very soul. She couldn’t stop thinking about him.

What a fool she thought to herself. To fall for a man that she could never have.

Sighing, she let her mind drift as the wagon continued down the road. At noon, they stopped again to let the horses rest. Opening one of Mrs. Simpson’s bags she removed some corn tortilla and a chunk of pemican.

When they started up again, Tom sat in the middle of the seat, ready.

She could only laugh at herself. She had worried about him fitting into this new land. But he was adjusting the best out of all of them. As if he was determined to prove himself valuable. Silently, she looked over at Jake and realized why her brother was so intense. He had selected a role model to follow. And really, he couldn’t have chosen wiser.

The day progressed, more hot wind. When she looked up at the scorching sun, she was glad that for the hat Jake had forced her to wear. She couldn’t imagine life without it. Her skin would have been burned to a crisp.

They were turning a long bend in the road when one of the

soldiers suddenly pulled up and pointed to a distant ridge.

Mary's stomach clenched with fear. Three puffs of smoke rose from a distant butte. Even she knew what that meant. The Indians had found them.

Chapter Twelve

Jake's gut tightened. Why couldn't they just let them alone?

"Here," he said to Tom as he took the reins from him. "You better let me take it for a while."

The boy's eyes grew big as he looked at his sister. Jake could only clench down on his back teeth at the fear on Mary's face. It tugged at his soul to see her worried like that. A woman as fine as her shouldn't have a worry in this world.

"Better jump in the back," he told Tom as he flicked the reins for the horses to hurry.

"How far?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Five miles and a bit to Horse Head Crossing. It's the only ford ten miles either way. If we can make that, we'll be fine."

She frowned as she turned to look over her shoulder. He followed her gaze and saw another two puffs of smoke rise from the distant ridge.

He flicked the reins again to bring the horses up into a full trot. The wagon bounced, forcing Mary to grab the sideboard. Amy squealed in the back but when Jake looked back, Tom had his arm around her, holding her tight to the side of the wagon. The little girl held the carpet bag to her chest, making sure it didn't jump out of the wagon.

Every bit of sense was yelling at him to get the horses up to a full gallop. But they had too far to go. If he used them up now, there wouldn't be anything for the last bit.

"Will they find us?" Mary asked him as she put a hand up to hold her hat on tight.

"They know where we are at. It's just a question if the ones they was signaling to are close enough."

Her face drained of color as she turned and scanned the surrounding desert.

"You take the forward right," he told her. "Tom," he yelled over his shoulder. "You got back right, Amy, back left, and I'll take forward left. You yell out if you see anything. Don't worry about being wrong. Just tell us."

Each of the others frowned as they concentrated on watching their assigned sector.

Another mile had passed when the wagon bounced harder than normal with a nasty creak from the rear axle. His heart stopped while he waited. But the wagon held. Gritting his teeth, he tried to

concentrate on missing the bigger holes and bumps. If they lost the wagon, they were goners for sure.

Rounding a bend, he was surprised to see the two soldiers pulling back on their reins.

“We’ll follow,” the corporal said.

“Not too far,” Jake yelled to him. “They can hit us out of anywhere.”

Nodding, the two men fell in with the other two soldiers.

Silently, Jake sent up a thank you that they had four soldiers. It might make all the difference.

They’d put another mile behind him when he felt the horses starting to falter. It had been almost eighteen miles, and they were about done in.

“There,” Tom yelled from the back.

Jake turned to find the boy pointing off to the Northwest. His stomach dropped when he spotted a faint dust cloud.

“GET ON!” he yelled at the horses as he began to whip them with the reins. Again, that dreadful creak sound from below sent a chill down his spine, but really, they didn’t have much of a choice. It was getting to the station fast or die.

Glancing over, he couldn’t help but smile. Mary gripped the side of the wagon with one hand and held her pistol with the other. God, what a woman.

He had to get them through. That was all there was to it.

Suddenly, the four soldiers raced past the wagon gathering in front of them, slapping at their horses.

Jake quickly glanced over his shoulder, the dust cloud had gotten closer, he could faintly see figures in front of the dust, racing for the wagon as if it held all the treasures of the world.

“You Bast ...” he started to yell at the soldiers abandoning them. But the men were pulling up next to a large pile of boulders guarding a pass before the road descended down to the river.

“We’ll hold them off,” The corporal yelled to them as he pulled his rifle and handed the reins to one of the other soldiers.

A quick pang of shame filled Jake for ever doubting them. These men were willingly sacrificing themselves so that he could get Mary and the children to safety. All for twelve dollars a month.

The wagon raced through the gap and down the slope to the river. He quickly began to pull back on the reins and pushed at the brake handle to slow the racing wagon.

“Will they be all right?” Mary asked as she looked back to the soldiers deploying amongst the large boulders.

“Probably,” he yelled over the racing wind, wishing he was as positive as he tried to sound. “Keep a lookout. There might be more between us and the station.”

She bit her lip as she returned to scanning her assigned area.

They had rounded another curve in the road when the sound of rifles echoed down the valley. Four, followed by the big bang of what sounded like a Fifty caliber. Not military issue, he thought and realized some Indian had probably taken it off a Buffalo hunter.

That big bang was followed by a mix of more rifles.

Would the soldiers be able to hold them off? he wondered as he let loose of the brake. They had to. They just had to, he thought to himself as they came around another bend to see the station on the far side of the river.

Six stone buildings on either side of the road. A rail fence corral, and a large green garden down by the river.

He let out a long sigh and smiled over at Mary. She stared back at him, silently asking if they were going to make it.

Nodding, he flicked the reins as the wagon came down off the slope onto flat ground. Within minutes they reached the ford. He had to yell at the horses to keep them going, they both wanted to stop for a drink, but Jake wasn't stopping until he had this lot behind stone walls.

The rifle fire behind them had stopped. His stomach clenched, had it stopped because they were all dead, or had the Indians decided they weren't worth the price?

Again, Mary glanced at him with a big smile as several people rushed from the buildings to meet the wagon.

Pulling back on the reins he brought the wagon to halt just outside the main building and sat back with a heavy sigh. Things were different when a woman and children were involved. He'd been in tight spots before. But this was different, he realized as a gut-churning dread washed through him.

Jumping down, he lifted Amy up out of the back and down onto the ground. Tom jumped over the side, landing easily. Smiling to himself he held out a hand to help Mary Rose, then nodded at the pistol in her hand. “You can put that away for now.”

She looked at the gun in her hand with a confused frown then slipped it into the pocket of her dress.

When she reached for his hand, he changed his mind and gently took her by the waist and lifted her off the box and set her down right

in front of him. She was a slight thing, it wasn't no harder than lifting a goose on the wing.

The two of them stood there for a moment, but inches apart as the world disappeared. It was just the two of them, their eyes locked. God how he wanted to kiss her until next Sunday.

But, there was no time for that he thought as he forced himself to step back. "That horse fresh," he said to the station master as he indicated a horse tied to a hitching post.

"Yes," The man answered with a curious frown.

"I'll have him back in a bit," Jake said as he grabbed his rifle from the wagon box and quickly swung up onto the horse.

"Where are you going?" Mary asked with a shocked face.

He nodded back up the road they had just come. "They might need a hand." And with that, he kicked the horse and began to race up the slope to the boulders.

Mary gasped as her jaw dropped. Jake was riding back into danger. How dare he abandon them like this. Didn't the man realize how important he was? How much they depended on him.

Taking a deep breath, she prepared to yell after him, demanding that he stop. But that would never do. Not with a man like Jake. It would be as if she asked the sun not to shine, the wind not to blow.

"Will he be all right?" Amy asked as she took Mary's hand and looked at the man and horse growing smaller in the distance.

Mary squeezed Amy's hand, but she didn't answer. How could she?

"He'll be fine," Tom told her sister. "That's Jake Parker."

She couldn't help but smile at the admiration in Tom's voice. "Come on, inside."

The station master was busy undoing the horses. Mary guided the children into the building and sighed. It was cooler as if the stoned walls kept the desert sun at bay.

"So, what is going on?" the station master asked as he stepped in. "Why'd I just let a man race off with my best horse?"

Mary gave him a reassuring smile before she told him everything. The initial attack, the abandoned Wild China Pond station. The long walk through the desert. The terrifying race in the wagon. Everything.

When she finished, her shoulders slumped.

The Station master cursed under his breath then shook his head. "Always did like Jim Courier. Ran the Wild China station."

The pain in the man's eyes reminded her just how many people had been lost and how close she and her siblings had been to be counted among them.

The man sighed then pointed to a table. "Have a seat. I'm sure your man will be back soon. Dinner's not for another couple of hours."

Her heart jumped at the realization that this man thought she and Jake were a couple. A delicious feeling of rightness flashed through her. She decided not to correct him. Instead, she guided the children to the table.

When she sat down, a wave of tiredness washed over her. She glanced over at Tom and Amy and realized both of them were feeling it as well. Hours of extreme terror will make anyone tired. It sapped the very energy from a person's marrow.

The three of them sat there in silence. No one wanting to talk about the man who wasn't with them. None of them wanting to

discuss what they had just gone through. Instead, each looked off into the distance, fighting to put their lives into some kind of order. Some kind of meaning.

As the minutes dragged by, Mary fought to hold back the tears. The man she loved had ridden into danger. Something he would always do, she realized. She was left alone as she would be after he delivered them to their destination.

Her world would be filled with emptiness. But that wouldn't matter she realized if he would just come back to them alive, unhurt. That was all she wanted in this world. She would willingly sacrifice her happiness if she knew he was well.

All sense of time was lost. The station Master put plates of tamales and beans in front of them, but no one really ate, they each continued to think about the man out there.

She was pushing the food around on her plate when the door burst open and a young boy yelled, "Riders coming in."

Mary Rose jumped from her seat and was out the door before the words had finished bouncing off the far wall.

She lifted a hand to shield her eyes. Four horses. Her heart hitched as she held her breath. There should have been five.

"Please," she whispered. "Please be all right."

The four horses grew closer. She searched for any clue as her heart raced.

"It's him," Tom yelled as he pointed. "In the back. He's got a man behind on his horse."

Mary's eyes narrowed as she tried to focus. Then she saw him, wide shoulders. That gray hat. It was him and he looked well. Uninjured. Tall in the saddle, his reins in one hand, his rifle in the other.

"Jake," she yelled as she rushed towards him.

He broke free from the group and hurried his horse across the ford to pull to a stop in front of her. His large smile allowed her heart to beat again. He so looked like a little boy pleased about his latest adventure.

The soldier swung down from behind him and tipped his hat to her. But she could see nothing but the tall man in the saddle. He was all right. Her prayers had been answered. Reaching out she grabbed his leg to make sure he was really there.

He smiled down at her then swung his leg over the front of the saddle to drop to the ground in front of her.

"Don't do that again," she said through clenched teeth.

He laughed, then shrugged. "A man's got to do what a man's got to do."

It took every bit of strength not to argue with him. Now was not the time. Instead, she slipped her arm into to his and hugged it close.

Chapter Thirteen

Two days later, as Fort Stockton came into view, Jake looked up at the sky and said a silent thank you. The trip had been uneventful after leaving the Pecos River.

“Is that it?” Mary Rose asked with surprise. “It’s not very big.”

He studied the town. A couple of dozen wood and adobe buildings. The fort palisades off to the right. He laughed. “It’s the biggest thing between San Antonio and El Paso. One of the drivers was saying they had almost four hundred people there if you counted the soldiers.”

A look of disappointment crossed behind her eyes, but she quickly hid her feelings and smiled back at Tom and Amy. Both children smiled back, obviously ecstatic at reaching safety.

A cold feeling of loss washed over Jake as he realized each passing minute brought him closer to leaving this lot. A quick regret hit him only to be pushed aside. He had a job to do. Ian’s killer had to be brought to justice. Besides ...

“I have no idea where my uncle’s ranch is located,” Mary said.

“We’ll check at the stage station. They need to know what is going on and I’m sure they’ll let us use the wagon to take you lot out to your uncle’s. If it’s close maybe we can do it today.”

She nodded then bit her lip and gave him a strange look. As if she had something she wanted to say but was holding off. Instead, she smiled and said, “I imagine you can’t wait to be rid of us.”

“No,” he growled as he shook his head. “It isn’t like that at all.”

Reaching over, she rested her hand on his arm. “I was teasing Jake. You have been so ... so heroic in getting us this far. We couldn’t have asked for more.”

He let out a long breath and bit his tongue. Again, he would never figure out women. One moment she looked as if the world was ending. The next she was trying to make him feel better about things.

The two of them sat in silence as the wagon pulled into the town. Pretty typical, he thought to himself. Probably half the population was Mexican. Every man wore a gun and the few women looked at them with interest, shifting to follow them with their gaze as they heaved to a halt outside the stage line.

He told Tom to lead the horses to the water trough and Amy to stay in the back.

She started to object. He nodded to the carpet bag. “I need you to protect your family’s things.”

Her eyes widened at her sudden responsibility. She smiled at him and nodded.

“Come on,” he said to Mary as he took her elbow and helped her up onto the boardwalk outside the stage office.

A grizzled old man stood behind a counter, an eyebrow lifted in question.

Jake took a deep breath then explained what had happened. The man listened then nodded. “Thought it might be something like that. But I got to tell you. I didn’t expect no passengers to make it through.”

“We would like to borrow the wagon and team to go to my uncles,” Mary said, “If that is all right. I promise we will bring it back.”

The old man shrugged. “I ain’t got no need for it. I’ll send it back to Castle Gap on the next supply run. Won’t need it for two weeks or so. Who be your uncle?”

“Benjamin Fulton,” she answered, “Can you tell us where he might be located.”

The man’s brow furrowed for a moment and a sense of dread flashed into Jake’s heart at the man’s expression. He held his breath waiting for the next words.

The man studied her for a moment then said, “Ben Fulton’s place is southwest of here, about five miles or so. Dug himself a well, the first thing. Gots the only water that way.”

Mary turned to him with a questioning look. He nodded. “We can be there in a couple of hours.”

“Ben know your coming?” the man asked with curiosity.

Mary sighed. “I wrote to him from the train, but I don’t know if the letter has reached him yet.”

The man laughed. “It was probably in the mail pouch on the stage that you was on.”

Jake watched as a look of fear passed over Mary’s face. “Don’t worry,” he said. “If there are problems, I’ll bring you back to town.”

Mary gave him a weak smile before turning and thanking the man and promising to have his wagon and team returned soon.

At the door, Jake stopped and turned back to the man. “You seen a thick-set man, black hair, nasty scar along his jaw? Goes by the name of Burk. James Burk.”

Mary gave him a strange look, obviously upset at being reminded of his true priority.

The station master thought for a moment then shook his head.

“No, can’t say I have. There ain’t been no strangers in town for a good month.”

Jake sighed, it had obviously been too much to hope for. The man could have gone anywhere. His only hope was that Fort Stockton was the only town within a hundred miles. It would have been the obvious place to go to.

Once back outside, he helped Mary up onto the wagon box and prepared to flick the reins when he stopped and looked over at her. “You ready for this. They got a hotel across the street.”

She bit her lip as she shook her head. “No, the sooner we get this over with, the better.”

Jake shrugged as he flicked the reins. “He’s family. He has to take you in.”

She laughed. “Jake, not all families are like yours.”

“Their loss,” he said with a shrug.

Mary's stomach twisted itself into a knot. She had been dreading the coming confrontation with her uncle every step along the way. He had told her not to come but she had ignored him. That was bad enough, but now, it was even worse. Her body was being torn by a dozen different emotions.

"There's the springs," Jake said as he nodded off to the left.

Amy gasped behind them. Crystal clear water in a large rock-edged pool a hundred yards wide. The water was so clear she could see fish swimming at the bottom of the pond. It looked like an oasis in this harsh land. Cool, life-giving. No wonder the army had built a fort here.

Jake flicked the reins to keep the horses going and once again Mary felt that sense of dread. She would be saying goodbye to this man. He was going to walk out of her life to never return. And she would be throwing herself and her siblings on the mercy of a man she hadn't seen since she was a little girl.

What would she do if he refused to take them in? There was no alternate plan. Her money was almost gone. And the town was so small, filled with hard men. There would be no rescue there.

A heavy silence fell over the group. Each lost in their own thoughts. She would have thought both Tom and Amy would be excited about finally getting to their destination. Instead, it was as if they had taken on her worry and fear. She had tried so hard to keep it from them, but obviously, she had failed miserably.

As they progressed she noticed that Jake continually scanned the area. Surely he wasn't still worried about Indian attack. Not this close to the fort. She was going to ask him about it but held her tongue. She didn't want to get into another conversation with him. Instead, it was better to begin to pull away. Perhaps a little separation would ease the pain.

Two hours later a distant farmhouse came into view. Her heart jumped. Was that her uncles? It looked so bare. A wooden house, a corral, a small shed. No trees. No green fields. Nothing but sage bushes, cactuses, and brown grass clumps for as far as the eye could see.

The desolation seemed overwhelming. It was so different than Ohio. All the way here, she had hoped for more. A large ranch house surrounded by out buildings and a dozen workers.

But this was heartbreaking. The main house separated from a smaller building but sharing one roof. A six-foot-wide walkway

between the two buildings. She turned to Jake with a questioning frown.

“The smaller building is the kitchen. Get’s too hot to be part of the main building.”

Her heart ached. That would become her responsibility, she realized, cooking and cleaning for her uncle.”

“Chickens,” Amy said with a smile, pointing to several scrawny birds scratching in the dirt.

Even the chickens looked hard, Mary thought to herself. More like those roadrunner birds than plump chickens.

Jake continued to frown as he looked around then shook his head as he pulled the wagon to a halt outside the front door to the building.

Mary held her breath as a tall thin man stepped out. He looked up and frowned. “Mary Rose?”

“Uncle Benjamin,” she yelled as she jumped down and rushed to give him a hug.

The man wrapped his arms around her then coughed and pulled back to stare down into her eyes. “What in the world are you doing here? I said not to come.”

“We didn’t have a choice.”

He continued to frown then looked over her shoulder to the wagon. “Thomas, Amelia?”

“Tom,” her brother said as he jumped down and held out his hand.

Her Uncle studied him for a moment the reached out and shook it.

“Amy,” her sister said with a bashful smile.

The thin man shook his head. “God, you look just like your mother at that age. Even the same pigtails.”

She blushed then stood next to Mary and put her hand around her waist.

“And this is Mr. Parker,” Mary said to her uncle. “The stage was attacked. He saved us.”

The man studied Jake for a long second then coughed into his hand before nodding to the house. “Come in. this is a story I got to hear. But really Mary Rose. You shouldn’t have come.”

Her heart squeezed with pain. The look of disappointment in his eyes was like a knife sunk between her shoulder blades.”

Jake jumped down from the wagon. “Jake,” he said as he shook her uncle’s hand. “If it is all right with you. I’ll water the horses then bed down in the shed for the night. I ain’t looking forward to that

road in the dark. Not with the Comanche in the area.”

A quick burst of happiness washed through Mary as she realized she would not have to say goodbye immediately.

“Of course,” Uncle Benjamin said.

She watched as Jake led the horses to a water trough. His wide shoulders and lean hips sent a thrill through her that could not be denied.

“Come on,” her uncle said, interrupting her thoughts. “One thing you’ll learn, you don’t stand around in the sun when you don’t have to.”

She nodded, there were a lot of things she had learned recently. What true heartache felt like was now at the front of that list.

Chapter Fourteen

Jake leaned on the top coral rail as he watched the half dozen horses mill about. The sun was close to setting. Another day ending, he thought as he tried to imagine his future days. Alone. A cold pain settled in the bottom of his gut, but really, that was the way of the world. Suffering and pain intermingled with joy if you were lucky.

They had eaten dinner. Even now, Mary was busy making the house comfortable for her brother and sister. He couldn't help but smile. That maternal streak was a mile wide with Mary. One of the many things he admired about her.

A footstep behind him made him twirl and his hand dropped to his gun. But it was the old man. Mary's uncle. He looked down at the hand hovering over the gun and smiled.

"Mary told me what you done for them. I'm appreciative."

Jake nodded as he turned back to looking at the horses. The old man joined him, resting his foot on the bottom rail.

"She also said you was chasing a man."

"Yes, James Burk, thick, with black hair and a nasty scar along his chin. Seen him?"

Ben laughed. "I ain't seen no one for six weeks, the last time I went to town for supplies."

The two men stood there for a moment, neither speaking, each lost in their own thoughts.

"Didn't see many head on the ride in," Jake said as way of opening the conversation.

"Nope," Ben said as he spat into the dust. "Last year's drought took a few, the Comanche and rustlers got another group. Ain't enough left to justify hiring hands."

Jake nodded, he well knew how hard it was raising stock for market. Any of a thousand things could go wrong and leave a man hard-pressed.

"Mary mentioned that you might be willing to sell me a horse."

"You can have the pick of the lot. I figure I owe you more than I can pay."

Jake shook his head. "No need, I'll pay market price. I would have done helped Mary Rose and the others regardless. They are good people, seems wrong that bad things might have happened to them."

"Which one you want?" Ben asked, nodding to the horses.

"That big chestnut," Jake answered.

The old man laughed. "Mary said you grew up on a horse ranch. It's obvious you know horseflesh. He reminds me of a woman I used to know."

"How's that?" Jake asked.

Ben laughed. "Long legs and brains."

Jake nodded, the red horse was almost sixteen hands and had that intelligent look in his eyes that he liked. A rusty red coat with a dark brown mane and tail. What was more important was that he looked like he had bottom. Staying power.

"He ain't but recently broke," Bend said. "Goes by the name of Pepper, don't ask me why. One of my hands named him that. Back when I had hands on the place."

It only took a few minutes to agree on a price that included a spare saddle, bridal, and two water bags.

They shook to seal the deal then both returned to leaning on the rail as the sun kissed the far horizon.

Ben coughed then spat into the dirt. He let out a heavy sigh then said, "When you finish doing what you got to do. I'd be happy to offer you a job. Can't pay much, but it's here if you need it."

Jake smiled then thanked him. "I never did good working for someone. It just makes me want to ride off and never look back. But I thank you for the offer."

Ben looked up at him then shook his head. "You keep chasing adventures. You'll never learn what is important."

"What is that?"

The old man spat again and said, "Wife and children. I ain't never had neither and ain't a day goes by I don't regret it. That long legged woman I was talking about. She would have made a grand wife. But I couldn't see it. I was too young and too foolish. One thing I can tell you, I don't regret adventures I didn't do, places I didn't go. No, at the end. The only thing you regret is not having loved ones close."

The old man's words were like a quick punch to the gut, Jake realized. Probably because they sounded so true. He turned to look back at the house then caught the old man staring at him with a knowing smile.

Jake nodded, "Then it is a good thing Mary, and the others came. In no time, you'll make yourselves into a family."

The old man scoffed then looked off into the distance. "There is never enough time. That's my whole point."

Jake grimaced then reached out to pat the horse. The old man was probably right. But that didn't change what had to be done. Not if he

was going to rest easy at night. Ian deserved to be avenged and nothing could get in the way of that.

“Tonight,” Ben said, “You be careful. I don’t want to get shot by mistake. I get up and use the privy two or three times a night. I can tell you, getting old is a pain.”

Jake laughed. “In that case, I better get settled before it gets dark. You tell Mary Rose thank you for dinner.”

The old man lifted an eyebrow. “She’d probably prefer to hear it from you directly.”

Jake froze for a moment.

“I can tell you,” Ben continued. “A walk in the desert at sunset with a pretty woman. Again, one of those things a man never regrets.”

Shaking his head, Jake pushed off the rail and said, “I’m leaving in the morning. I will hold off long enough to say goodbye, but I need to get going, any tracks are fading fast if they ain’t already disappeared.”

Ben studied him for a long moment then sighed. “I’ll be seeing you in the morning.” Then without another word, the man turned and walked back to the house.

Jake couldn’t help feeling as if he had disappointed the man somehow. “Get over yourself, Jake,” he muttered under his breath. He’d accomplished what he had to do. Gotten them to safety. Now it was time to focus on what he had set out for.

Mary forced herself not to bang the pans as she fought against the anger burning inside of her. Jake hadn't come in for breakfast. Tom had run out to call him in, but Jake had declined, saying he'd eat on the trail.

He was really leaving, she realized with a heart aching pain. There would be no last minute changed of mind. A man didn't decline breakfast unless he was already committed to his next task.

And he hadn't returned to the house after dinner last night. It was as if he were avoiding them. Or worse, avoiding her.

Why?

Had they meant so little to him that they could easily be dismissed? Nothing more than a chore to be completed.

A sick feeling of despair filled her at the thought of him riding away before she told him what he meant to her.

Hanging the cleaned pot, she quickly removed her apron then started for the shed. Glancing over she caught sight of Tom lifting an ax above his head and bringing it down to split a log. She watched for a minute to make sure he didn't slice off a piece of his foot.

Amy was off in the distance feeding the chickens. Talking to them as if they were her best friends.

She couldn't help but smile. Both of them had taken on chores without being asked. They well knew how important it was that their uncle accepted them and want them to stay.

Tom looked up at her and she caught it in his eyes. The pain at the thought of Jake leaving them. He glanced over at the wagon with the horse tied off behind it.

Her heart broke. Jake was taking the wagon back to the stage line for them. And then he would disappear into the desert. Would she ever see him again? What if he died out there? All alone. No one would ever know.

Lifting her hem, she started for the shed. She had absolutely no idea what she was going to say to him. She just knew that it was important that he realize how much he meant to them. How thankful they were.

Reaching the shed she looked in to find him bent over retrieving his saddlebags.

"Mary Rose," he said without looking back then slowly turned to smile at her.

"How did you know it was me?"

Laughing he said, “the wind’s behind you. Smelled you coming.”

“What?” she gasped.

His eyes softened as he stepped closer. “Your lavender soap. And you baked this morning. If’n I’d known you made biscuits I might have come in.”

She could only stare up at him in disbelief, it was disconcerting to think that he knew so much about her. The two of them stared into each other’s eyes for a long moment until he gently lifted a wisp of her hair and tucked it behind her ear.

“Mary Rose ...”

“Jake ...”

Both of them spoke at the same moment then came together as a natural force of nature. His lips took hers and a feeling of rightness filled her as she melted into his arms.

Their lips explored, tasting, taking, demanding more. Her arms surrounded his neck, pulling him down so she could have more. His hands went to her waist, holding her in place.

Oh, she was so lost, she realized as a soft moan escaped from deep in her throat. Lost to never be found again.

Slowly, he pulled back. She opened her eyes to find him staring down at her.

“I’ve wanted to do that since I walked out of the desert.”

“Why didn’t you,” she asked.

Laughing, he shook his head. “A man don’t accost a lady. Especially when he won’t be staying.”

Her heart broke as she stared into his eyes. He was still leaving. Even after a kiss like that. A kiss to beat every kiss in the world. The pain and regret in his eyes confirmed it. He was riding away.

Stepping back, she twisted away so that he wouldn’t see the tears in her eyes.

“I ... we ... we owe you our thanks, Mr. Parker. My brother and sister would not be alive without you.”

“Mary. Let me explain.”

“Explain?” she snapped as she turned back to him. “There is no need for explanation. You have your mission. That is what is important.”

He sighed heavily and said, “Mary Rose.”

Her heart broke again, oh, how she loved the way he said her name. She wished she could hear it every day for the rest of her life.

Lifting her hem, she turned and raced for the house, yelling over her shoulder, "I've got a food package for you."

Please don't let him see me cry, that would be too painful. Let the man go in peace, he deserved that and so much more. She should never add to his burdens and making him feel guilty was wrong. Just wrong.

When she got to the kitchen, she quickly dried her eyes and forced herself to stop crying. Not now. She could do that later. Not now, she told herself as she squared her shoulders and forced her feet to take her out into the yard.

Calling Amy over, she handed the little girl the package of food to take to Mr. Parker.

He stepped out of the shed, looking just how he had looked the first time she saw him. His saddlebag was thrown over his shoulder. His gray hat pulled down tight. Long legs and wide shoulders. Her heart melted.

Amy held out the package to him. She watched as he dropped to one knee in front of the girl and said something before pulling her into a hug. Her sister threw her arms around his neck and cried into his shoulder.

Jake held her tight then looked up at Mary with a beseeching pain that pulled at her.

"Come away Amy," she said to her sister. "Let Mr. Parker be on his way."

Amy reluctantly stepped back wiping at her eyes.

"Thank you, Jake," Tom said as he stepped forward holding out his hand.

Jake smiled down at the boy then took the hand and shook it firmly. Man to man. "You keep after them books. They'll do more for you in the long run."

Tom swallowed hard then stepped back.

Now it was her turn to say goodbye, she realized as she gritted her teeth to stop from screaming, begging him to stay.

"Mary Rose McCain," he said as he tipped his hat then turned and stepped up onto the wagon box.

She had to say something. Anything. "Mr. Parker. If you are in the area again. Please feel free to stop by at any time. You will always be welcome here."

He studied her for a long moment then nodded and said, "Thank you, ma'am. I'll try to take you up on that."

Then like a knife to her soul, he flipped the reins and started down the road. Her world shattered into a thousand pieces as she watched the only man she would ever love drive away.

Chapter Fifteen

Jake's heart still ached. Driving away from Mary Rose had been one of the hardest things he had ever done. A soul crushing pain that had to be endured. Ian's ghost would haunt him for the rest of his life if he didn't avenge his murder.

Zion had tasked him with this. Ian worked for them. He was a young man who never hurt anyone. If he returned without succeeding, the look of disappointment on Zion's face would eat at his gut.

After dropping off the wagon, he stopped by the livery to see if anyone had seen a big dun with a ZC brand, or a man with a nasty scar along his jaw. But no such luck. After that, he checked in with the sheriff and all three salons. Again, with no luck.

Sighing to himself, he led his horse over to the general store and stocked up on supplies. Enough for two weeks. As he swung up on Pepper, he looked over his shoulder to the south. down the road back to Ben Fulton's place.

He froze for a long moment, torn. That kiss had done something to his insides. Made him aware of just what he was walking away from.

"No," he growled as he kicked Pepper and started him north. Maybe after.

As he rode out of town, he silently shook his head. What was he thinking? A woman like Mary Rose would never be interested in a man like him. No prospects, no future. She was the type destined for more. Beautiful, intelligent, kind, A man couldn't ask for more.

His gut continued to churn as he worked his horse up to a trot and then a gallop. He told himself he was in a rush to get back on the trail of Burk. But deep inside, he knew the truth. He hoped some distance would ease the pain twisting inside of him.

It took him three days to reach the point where Burk had killed his horse. Three days of constant vigilance for any sign of Indians. Being caught alone out here could be deadly.

The desert hadn't changed. Dry, with sage and cactus, spread out over a flat land broken by empty riverbeds waiting for flash floods. Glancing up at the sun he gave a silent prayer of thanks that it wasn't mid-summer.

Pulling up on a small ridge he looked down. The coyotes had disposed of most of the horse. Only some dried bones and his old saddle remained. Sitting quietly, he examined the area. No way anyone would have waited two weeks for him to come back. But old habits die hard. Zion had drummed it into him at an early stage.

Hurry, and you end up dead.

Once he was sure he was alone, he worked his way down off the ridge to the set of boulders. This was where the shot had come from. He was sure of it. Getting down, he slowly examined every inch until he found what he was looking for.

A man had holed up here for hours. The horse dropping would say at least six, maybe eight. A faint print in the sand next to a rock confirmed it. No cigarette butts, no empty casing.

Turning, he looked back to where his horse had been killed. Why his horse? He wondered. Why not him?

Because out here, a man without a horse was as good as dead, he realized.

Turning slowly, he tried to work out where the man might have gone. He hadn't gone north or east. Jake would have seen him. It must be south or west. That could mean anywhere between Brownsville and El Paso. Anywhere along the border with Mexico. A thousand miles.

Shaking off the burden of the task in front of him, Jake mounted his horse and slowly began sweeping back and forth for any sign. Hoofprints had long ago been erased by the wind. It took almost half an hour to find a scuffed rock. The kind of scuff an iron shoe makes against hard stone.

Two hours later he found a rock kicked aside. The only reason he could tell was that the lichen was now on the bottom. Not the kind of thing a wild animal did. If it was Burk, he was headed west.

Why?

Jake sat his horse and stared to the west. Why? Was he headed for the border? No one had seen him in Fort Stockton. So he hadn't been there. At least not yet.

Grumbling under his breath he nudged Pepper forward. If he knew where the man was going it would make life so much easier. Zion used to say the best way to track an animal is to get there before he does.

On the long trail down from Oregon, he had learned a bit about the man. A person couldn't help but learn if he looked. For instance. Burk's woodcraft was top-notch. Small fire out of the way. Few tracks. The man glided through a country without leaving much of a mark.

Then there was the way he always left before Jake could get to him. This was a man with a good sense of danger. He knew he was being tracked and took precautions.

Overall, if Jake had to judge. This was a man on the other side of the law. Long before killing Ian, he'd learned the craft of not being

found.

As he rode, Jake scanned the ground with one eye and kept the other looking for Indians. There was a thousand places to hide out here. He could be jumped at any moment. But still, he tried to focus on the trail.

But even with those two things tugging at him, the memory of Mary Rose constantly clawed at him. The smiles of Tom and Amy pulled at his heart. They were both such sweet children. Amy was going to break a dozen hearts before she was through. As for Tom, the boy had something special. A steadiness, mature beyond his years, and a keen eye. He'd do just fine in this world.

They didn't need him, not if they had Mary. She'd see they turned out well. But something deep inside of him chewed at him, making him want to be involved in their lives.

Sighing again, he pulled Pepper to the side and started down a dry draw. Now that he knew his man was headed west, he could focus his search.

He was just coming up out of the draw when a distant movement caught his eye. A lone Indian brave was riding to the south, A mile, maybe a mile and half away.

Jake froze, then slowly backed Pepper back down so only his head rose above the lip of the draw.

Holding his breath, he watched the Indian continue on. Letting out a long breath, Jake sighed with relief, he hadn't been spotted.

But a lone brave didn't make a lot of sense. He was probably on a scouting mission for a larger group. Jake's gut tightened. He needed to stay hidden, but that wouldn't allow him to keep searching for sign.

Grumbling, he pulled Pepper back into the draw. He'd make a dry camp here for the night, no fire. Unless they happened right on him, he'd never be seen.

That night as he lay wrapped in his bedroll, his head resting on his saddle he looked up at the stars and wondered what Mary Rose was doing that very moment. Was she reading to the children, the dinner dishes cleaned?

Or was she looking up at the very same stars and wondering about him.

Clenching his teeth, he turned over and tried to get to sleep.

Two more days he searched finding just enough signs to know he was headed in the right direction. A small fire, a long piece of black horsehair drifting in the wind, caught on a sagebrush.

Every time he topped a ridge or came up out of a draw he would

hold just below the crest and study the area before continuing on.

He needed water, he thought with a shake of his head. Three days and the place was dryer than the salt flats. So different than eastern Oregon. Even on the dry side of the mountains, there was still creeks and the occasional pond. A man couldn't go a day without seeing water. Out here, he could go a month and never see a drop.

Twisting in the saddle, he tried to figure out what to do next. He'd have to leave the trail and get water, there was no question. But where?

Wild China Pond. The tanks above the station would be more than enough. Or Castle Gap. A little further, but it would be nice to see the Simpsons again. Besides, they'd probably enjoy word that Mary Rose and the others had safely reached her uncle's ranch.

Pulling at the reins he nudged Pepper and started for the Gap. It would be a day there and another back. Two days off of tracking his man. But it couldn't be helped. He could also purchase more food.

He was falling behind, he realized with a sharp burst of pain. Burk could be halfway to England by now for all he knew where he was going. For the first time, he began to have doubts about ever finding him. Real worries. Was this all just a wasted exercise?

The added awareness that the chase had taken him away from Mary and left her with the impression that he didn't care.

Once again, he cursed himself as he shook his head. Over the last two weeks, the search for Burk had taken on a new urgency. Now, falling behind, he felt the chance of success slipping away like sand running out of a bucket.

Then a new thought jumped into his head. If he didn't get Burk, he would never get back to Mary. A simple realization that ate at his stomach. Ever since leaving, in the back of his mind had been the thought if he could get Burk then he could visit Mary Rose. That kiss. A woman like Mary didn't kiss a man like that unless she felt something special.

A fluttery feeling filled his gut at the thought of someone like Mary thinking him special.

As he rode, he constantly scanned the horizon for any sign of trouble. It was strange, having a woman like Mary in the world changed the way a man looked at things. Keeping himself alive took on extra meaning.

It was getting close to sunset when he rode into the station at Castle Gap. Both of the Simpsons were out watching him come in. the sister behind them, Juan was off feeding the horses but rose to shield his eyes.

Jake took a deep breath as he pulled up and nodded.

Mrs. Simpson frowned at him, "Heard some shooting after you left. You get that lot to their uncles?"

"Yes Ma'am," Jake said as he swung down from his horse and led him to the trough. "Going on six days ago." As the horse drank, he filled both water skins.

The woman grunted with satisfaction then slapped her husband's shoulder and said, "You going to tell him?"

Mr. Simpson frowned at his wife. "Give the man a chance to settle in. Won't do no good telling him now, he ain't leaving until the morning."

Jake's eyes narrowed as he tried to hold down the excitement building inside of him.

Mr. Simpson shrugged. "That man you was looking for. The scar along the chin, black hair. Horse with ZC brand."

"Yes?" Jake said quietly as he held his breath.

"Passed through here three days ago. Him and three others. Ain't a one of them I would have trusted. Kept the missus and her sister out of sight as much as possible," he added with a knowing look.

Jake's brow furrowed as he focused on the man. "Any idea where they might be going?"

Mr. Simpson smiled back at him. "That's the thing, they had themselves an argument right there in my dining room. Arguing between Del Rio or Van Horn Wells."

Jake scoffed, "that's five hundred miles of difference. And why there?"

The other man's smile grew. "Ain't but one reason. Steal some cattle and sell them in Mexico. They won't be the first. Don't have to worry about brands or bill of sales."

Jake thought about what he had heard and slowly began to realize, the perfect area to steal a heard from would be south of Fort Stockton. They could go either direction from there. A sick feeling filled him as he pulled the horse back from the trough.

"Yeah, that was what I was thinking also," Mr. Simpson said. "South of Stockton. Any chance Them McCains uncle's ranch was south of Stockton?"

"Sorry boy," Jake said to the horse as he climbed up into the saddle. "We got a long ride."

"You sure son?" Mr. Simpson said.

"Let him be," Mrs. Simpson said then addressed Jake. "You tell

Mary Rose I was wrong.”

“Wrong?” Jake asked. “About what.”

The older woman smiled. “She’ll know.”

Jake didn’t have time to try and decipher the woman’s mystery. Instead, he tipped his cap then spurred Pepper down the road. His heart raced at the thought of Ben Fulton losing more stock. But even more importantly. He was going to get to see Mary Rose again.

Smiling, he nudged Pepper to go even faster.

Chapter Sixteen

This was becoming her time, she thought with a sad smile. A few moments each day that was hers. Mary Rose took a deep breath as she wrapped her shawl around her shoulders. She had come to enjoy this brief period of time after the sun had gone down but the sky had not yet grown dark. The desert cooled, the birds sang, and a soft breeze blew in from the gulf hundreds of miles away.

The dishes were done. The children had finished both their chores and their schoolwork. This was hers, that time when she could think about their future. And what might have been?

Sighing, she folded her arms around her stomach and started down the trail past the water tank, past the chicken coop, and out into the desert.

Looking up and over her shoulder she saw the first star and thought of making a wish, but then shook her head. Her dreams would not come true. It was becoming rather obvious.

A deep loneliness filled her. Nothing was as she had hoped. Her Uncle had accepted them, but even she could tell that he was barely holding onto his ranch. A few cattle spread over a vast area, but no hands to work them.

A dry, lonely land that offered nothing but prickly plants and mean animals.

In the far distance, a coyote yipped. Sighing, she turned for home, it wouldn't do to be caught out here after dark.

As she walked, she wondered what he was doing at that moment. Jake. Was he still searching for his man? Had he found him? And what then? Would he kill the man then turn his horse north to return to his sister's home?

These and a dozen other questioned bounced around in her head.

Or was he even now laying in some dusty draw, broken and busted, dying all alone. Had the Indians got him. Or had the man he chased lain in ambush and shot him instead of his horse. The thought sent a cold chill down her spine. She would never know, she realized. He would disappear into nothingness and she would never know.

Wiping at her eyes, she let herself into the house and gave her uncle a quick smile. His eyes followed her with obvious concern. Sometimes she believed he knew her feelings for Jake.

"The other two are already asleep," he whispered as he put his bible on the table next to the oil lamp.

Mary Rose nodded, her brother and sister had adjusted well. Tom

worked all day as hard as a twelve-year-old boy could work. Amy helped where she could, but her care of the chickens was her greatest contribution.

It wasn't right, Mary thought to herself. Tom should be in school. Amy should be playing with friends. Neither should be stuck out here so far away from everyone. But then wasn't that the fate of so many people? How dare she believe she and her siblings were special and deserved more.

That was one thing she had learned on the trip out here. No one deserved anything. A person got what they did for themselves. Pure and simple.

She gave her uncle a quick smile and said, "I will be going to bed as well. If I wait too long, Amy wakes up when I climb in next to her."

Uncle Ben nodded with a sadness about his eyes.

Mary was about to open the small bedroom she shared with her sister when she turned back to the man sitting alone in the gloom.

"Thank you, Uncle," she said to him.

His brow furrowed in question.

"For taking us in. I don't know what we would have done without you."

Instead of the smile she anticipated, he grimaced then began coughing.

Her heart hitched, his cough had not gotten any better. He had repeatedly assured her that it was nothing more than the mesquite pollen that tickled the back of his throat this time of year. But a doubt was beginning to grow inside of her.

"I took you in because you are family," he said as he looked up into her eyes. "But it is the best decision I ever made."

The thought of family ignited a hundred new regrets inside of her. Family, Jake would return to his. Family, something she would never have of her own.

Giving her uncle a last smile, she opened the door to the room.

"Mary Rose," her uncle called after her then began coughing and waved at her to go on.

She hesitated for a moment but realized he wanted to be alone. Of course, he did. His home had been invaded by three new people he barely knew. His life had been turned upside down. Give the man a few minutes of peace. He deserved it.

Again, giving him a quick smile, she slipped into the room. She undressed without lighting a lamp then climbed into bed next to Amy.

As she lay there with her sister slightly snoring next to her, she looked up at the ceiling and wondered again where Jake was at and what he might be doing. But most of all, she wondered why he could not love her the way she loved him.

The next morning as she lit the fire in the kitchen stove, she planned out that day's menu. Eggs and beans for breakfast. A cold lunch of leftover roast from last night's meal wrapped in corn tortillas. The day was always too hot to light the stove for lunch, even in the separated kitchen.

Then that evening, she would cook some fried chicken. Amy had already identified the young rooster that would be their meal. Her sister hadn't been happy about it until the rooster started pecking at her favorite hen. Then it became easy for her to sacrifice him.

There were things that needed to be mended. With so few clothes, it seemed she spent half her time repairing hems and applying patches. Her stomach clenched. She would need to speak to her uncle about new clothes for the children. Tom was growing so fast that his pants were already at his ankles.

Tomorrow was laundry day. And the day after that she would lay down enough bread and tortillas to last the week.

After lunch, Uncle Ben sat on a chair in the shade. Tom was off in the shed working on something of importance to him. Amy was with her chickens of course. She was about to return to the house when a distant movement caught her eye.

Lifting a hand, she stared down the long road. Her heart stopped. A man was coming. A tall man on a horse, leading a second.

Was it Jake? Had he returned? Had he finally realized what he had abandoned?

Holding rock still, she watched as the distant figure grew bigger. Holding her breath, her hand went to her throat as her other arm hugged her middle. Please, she begged.

As he drew nearer, a sadness filled her. It wasn't Jake. He wasn't tall enough. Besides, she would know Jake anywhere. This was not him.

Dropping her hand, she called for Tom and Amy then glanced over at her uncle to see if he had seen what she had seen.

He rocked forward on his chair then stepped into the house and returned with his rifle. He joined her, watching the man approach.

"Army," Tom said with assuredness.

She looked again and saw what Tom saw. The blue uniform. The dark blue hat. Why? A thousand new worries filled her. Had the man

come to tell her that Jake was dead. His last dying wish that she be informed.

Would Jake even care if she knew what had happened to him?

Or was the Army telling people to come to the fort. Had the Comanche gone on the warpath and burned out a bunch of settlers.

Wait, she told herself as she tried to force her racing heart to slow.

Finally, the man loped into the yard and pulled to a halt.

“Lieutenant Stapleton,” she said with surprise.

“Miss McCain,” he said as he lifted his hat and bowed at the waist. “You did say it was permissible to call on you.”

Her stomach tightened, why was this man here?

“Besides,” he said with a happy smile. “I assumed you would wish your items returned.” He pulled the second horse forward. Their trunk and the second carpet bag were tied to his pack.

Her jaw dropped as she realized what this meant. Their things. Tom’s books, Amy’s dresses.

“How?” she asked, unable to believe what she was seeing. A sudden desire to squeal with joy filled her.

The handsome officer shrugged. “We got to the stage and found your things unmolested. And even more importantly, the mail. Washington gets very upset when the mail doesn’t get through.”

She could only stare in wonder when thankfully her uncle reminded her of her manners.

“Won’t you come in Lieutenant,” her uncle said. “Tom, you help the man get your things then see to the horses.”

Tom and the Lieutenant manhandled the heavy trunk down and carried it into the house.

Mary Rose felt a quick sense of shame. It was such a poor house. She had not had time to make it into a true home. What must he think of them? The quick shame was followed by a quick question.

“Sir,” she said after he had delivered their trunk. “Have you any word on Mr. Parker. I believe he has resumed to chase the killer of his friend. Have you heard anything of his progress?”

The young man frowned for a moment then shook his head. “He’d already come and gone before we returned.”

There was something strange to the man’s look. As he studied her for a long moment. Then shaking it off, he smiled. “If it is permissible, I would like to stay long enough to give my horses a rest.”

Once again, she was reminded of her failings as a hostess. “Of course, good sir. I will make coffee, and we would love it if you could

join us for dinner.” Amy would have to sacrifice a second rooster.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said as he dropped his hat on the dining table and sat down.

Mary paused for a moment as she tried to wrap her mind around what was happening. This was so unexpected. The novelty of company struck her. At home, people dropping by unannounced occurred constantly. Her father’s friends would appear, and her mother would move heaven and earth to make them feel comfortable.

“Do tell me,” her Uncle said as he pulled out another chair, “Did you catch the Indians who attacked my nieces and nephew.”

Lieutenant Stapleton frowned and shook his head. “Unfortunately, I believe they got over the border before we could take them.”

Mary almost scoffed. Just as Jake had predicted.

Busying herself with lighting the stove so that she could make coffee and then start dinner, she left the young man and her uncle talking about the Indians. Her mind couldn’t not think of Jake, alone out there. Had the Indians really left the area or was he even now fighting them?

An uneasiness filled her as she spent the day making dinner, only occasionally stepping into the house to share a quick moment with the others.

The dinner was a silent affair. Her uncle was never much of a talker. And Tom and Amy’s questions had long ago been answered. Mary fought to think of things to ask. But nothing came. It was as if her mind refused to focus, instead thinking of Jake still out there.

Shouldn’t the Army be helping track down a killer? Wasn’t that why they were here?

After she had cleaned the last dish, she turned to find the Lieutenant leaning in the kitchen’s doorway, staring at her.

She gasped with surprise then blushed, “You scared me.”

He smiled softly. “I thought we might go for a walk. It is a beautiful evening.”

Once again, her heart skipped with concern. “Of course,” she said as she dried off her hands then pulled down her sleeves. “If you will give me a moment to get my shawl.”

“Of course,” he said as he stepped back to give her room to leave. Still, she had to squeeze past him, all the while forcing herself not to frown with confusion.

As the two of them walked next to each other, she glanced up at him and realized just how handsome he was. With fine features, but not the roughness of Jakes.

“Miss McCain,” he said once they had gotten far enough away from the house so that he could not be heard. Taking his hat off, he twirled it in his hands.

He is nervous, she realized. Why?

Pausing for a moment, he finally began to speak, “I think you should know that I come from a rather wealthy family. In upstate New York.”

All she could do was nod. It was as she suspected but did not require her to comment.

“As you are also aware, there are very few women here on the frontier. Especially few young ladies such as yourself.”

Her stomach clenched into a tight ball as she wrapped her arms against the growing night chill air.

Taking a deep breath, he continued. “I will be leaving the Army within four months. Before the fall rains make the roads unpassable.”

“You are not making it a career?” she asked with surprise.

“No, I will go into politics. My father has arranged a state seat for me when I return.”

She looked again at the man and could see it, his future. A big house with servants. Glorious parties with women dressed in the latest fashion. An important man. The kind of man her father had always wished to become.

“That is all very nice,” she said. What else could she say?

He nodded then stopped and turned towards her. “That is why I believe we should be married.”

Chapter Seventeen

Married? Did the man say married?

Frowning, she looked up at him, desperately trying to understand. "But we barely know each other."

He smiled then shrugged. "Really, if you think about it. Everything makes sense. You and your brother and sister will be well taken care of. They will love New York. Besides, the story of me rescuing you from Indians, then marrying you will help my political career immensely. People really love a good romance like that. I was too young to serve in the war and most of my competitors have a distinguished war record. I need something as well."

"But ..."

"Please," he said as he gently took her hand. "I realize it is rather sudden. But I know it is for the best and I am sure you will also once you examine the situation closely."

"But, Lieutenant ..."

"Donald," he said with a smile.

Taking a deep breath, Mary Rose fought to gather herself. How was this possible? Her mind tumbled over a thousand different scenarios amidst a confusion like none other. And what he said about saving her from Indians. It was so wrong, Jake had saved them. Repeatedly.

"Donald, I don't believe ..."

"Mary," he interrupted. "Talk to your uncle, He will advise you to take this opportunity, I am positive. I will discuss the matter with him once you have accepted my proposal. I had planned on discussing it with him earlier. But both Tom and Amy never left us alone long enough."

The frown behind his eyes troubled her. Was he upset because her brother and sister had disrupted his plans? Suddenly she thought of Brandon Brooks back in Ohio. A cold shiver ran down her spine. Was she in danger of allowing herself to be placed in yet another untenable position again?

He glanced over his shoulder at the farmhouse and shook his head. "We will live with my family at first. Until we can have a house built in town. Or maybe in Albany."

A deep sadness filled her as she began to realize this might very well be the best offer she ever received. A man she barely knew. But wealthy, respectable. Her mother would have heartily approved. He would be steady, she realized.

But, still, something in the bottom of her soul refused to accept his offer. She turned to him to tell him she would not be able to agree to his proposal. She couldn't marry a man she didn't love. It wouldn't be fair to either him or herself.

A quick frown crossed behind his eyes when he saw her hesitation. "Think about it Mary, I am sure you will come to see the wisdom in my plan."

She was about to tell him no when she realized that she couldn't be so cavalier. There was Tom and Amy to think about. Both deserved a better life. If she was to accept this proposal, Tom would be able to go to university. Amy would be exposed to the upper crust of society and would marry well.

No, she didn't have the right to summarily reject this offer.

"Very well, Donald. I will think about it. Really this has been rather a shock."

He nodded as he tucked her hand into his arm and began to escort her back to the farmhouse. Glancing over, she saw something in his eyes that made her believe the man thought he had won and that she would easily accept his offer.

"Perhaps you could convince your uncle to bring you to church this Sunday. We have a nice Chapel at the fort. The services are not too long, and the Colonel's wife will be in attendance. We could go for a picnic after, by the springs."

Her mind raced as she felt her world spinning out of control. Her thoughts drifted to the image of Jake driving away. Those wide shoulders disappearing into the distance.

"Very well, Donald, I will talk to my uncle and try to convince him to attend church this Sunday.

"Excellent," he said with a wide smile. "I know if given but a little time, I will convince you that this is for the best."

An aching heart refused to believe it. No, the best had ridden away from her.

As Jake rode into the town of Fort Stockton his eyes scanned every horse tied at a hitching post. He carried his rifle across his lap and narrowed his eyes as he searched for his enemy. Pepper's head hung low as the big gelding made his way up the street.

Two weeks. The horse had performed admirably and deserved a bucket of oats and a good rest. He well knew that pushing him too hard would lead to disaster just when he was needed the most.

When he reached the only livery stable, he rode Pepper into the large barn and dismounted. Rolling his shoulders, he pushed at his lower back. Two weeks of sleeping on the ground made a man appreciate a bed.

"Oats and a good rub down," he told the stableman.

The old man nodded as he led the horse into the first stall.

"Where can a man get a bath around here?" he asked the stableman.

"Place next to the hotel. Two bits. Four if you want the water warm."

Hotel, a bed. Yes, he thought, he would spend the night in comfort. Visit the fort in the morning, then head out and start looking for Burk again.

When he reached the barn door, he couldn't stop from looking south. Mary Rose was only an hour away. Every instinct told him to ride and make sure she was well. Her and the others. His gut told him it was the most important thing to do in this world. But his brain remembered the lessons of Zion. The importance of justice, how society fell if there wasn't accountability.

Turning back to the stableman he nodded to his horse. "Treat him right. I don't think I've ever known better."

The man grabbed a pitchfork then glanced at him as if he was an idiot. "I treat all horses the same. Better than people but not as good as dogs."

Jake almost laughed then started for the hotel.

"That Dun with the ZC brand," the stableman said as he started forking hay into Pepper's manger. The one you was asking about last time you was here."

"Yes," Jake asked as he held his breath.

"Saw him, three days ago, that ZC brand, big as day on his right rump."

"Who was riding him. A man with a scar?"

The man's brow furrowed. "Don't know about people. But that horse I wouldn't forget. There was four of them. That Dun, two brown Sorrels with a mix of white stockings, and a gray appaloosa. Thing is, each of them horses had a different brand."

Jake's gut clenched. Three days. Again, the man had gotten away before he could be braced. "Did you see which way they went?"

"Like I said, I don't know about the men, but them horses went southeast."

"Thank you," Jake said as he tossed the man a silver dollar. "You see any of them horses again, you let me know. I'll be at the hotel 'till I ain't."

Southeast, it confirmed what he had thought. They were going to rustle cattle off the range and drive them down to Mexico. There would be no need to alter brands. A month's work and they could make a year's wages.

Striding to the hotel he couldn't help but smile. For the first time, he felt things coming to an end. He had a time, a direction, even a goal. For the first time, he was seeing where these men were going to be before they got there.

As he walked to the hotel, he passed a salon with mariachi music being played loudly. God a whiskey sounded good, but a bath sounded even better. Besides, the whiskey wasn't going anywhere.

The next morning Jake woke with a soft groan. The soft bed had twisted his back muscles into knots. After a heavy breakfast of steak and eggs with canned peaches on the side, he made his way to the fort. Again, passing the salon he had visited last night. Shaking his head, he pushed aside the desire to go in and resume where he had left off. No, there was more important matters to deal with.

He asked the first soldier he came across for directions to the Colonel. When he stepped into the office, he was surprised to see Sergeant Kennedy behind a desk. The man's eyebrows rose in surprise followed by a quick smile.

"Jake Parker, you get that woman and them children to her family?"

"Yes, but only because you sent four soldiers as an escort. If they hadn't been there those McCains would be dead."

The man dropped his head for a moment then took a deep breath. "Corporal Sands says you road back to help."

Jake shrugged then nodded to the door. "Can I see the Colonel? Got some things he might want to know."

"Yes. But let me go in first. I want to see his face when I tell him

you are here.”

The big man jumped up and opened the inner door before saying, “Colonel Forrest, Jake Parker would like a moment.”

“Parker, Jake Parker,” A deep voice said from inside the room. “You tell that sawed-off runt to get in here.”

Jake laughed then said to the Sergeant, “I weren’t but eight the last time I saw him.” Stepping into the office he was greeted by an older gentleman rising from the desk and holding out his hand. Graying at the temple, the man had put on some thickness since the last time he had seen him, a young officer escorting the wagon train on the Oregon Trail.

“Colonel Forrest,” Jake said as he shook the man’s hand. “It has been a while.”

“Seventeen years,” the man said as he stepped back and examined Jake. “Tell me of your brother. Luke. Did he ever marry that girl? Almost had to court marshal him, he was going to leave me in a bind over some girl. Can’t believe it. But probably the best Lieutenant I had.”

“He’s fine,” Jake said as he took the seat across from the large desk. “Yes, he married Rebecca. They’ve got two children with another on the way. It might already have arrived, I been gone a few months.”

The colonel smiled, obviously pleased. “And Zion, Hannah. I know they got married, I ran into Zion at Fort Dalles before I got sent back east.”

“Both doing well, Nine children. One of the boys is called James Forrest Campbell after you.”

The man blanched as he leaned back, very shocked. “James Forrest Campbell you say. Well, that is something.

A silence fell over the room as the Colonel thought about this news. After a moment, Jake broke in and said, “I just come in from the north, up by Wild China Pond and Estado Llano, thought I might pass along a bit of news.”

The Colonel held up his hand then yelled, “Kennedy, find Lieutenant Stapleton and ask him to come in.”

“Yes, Sir,” the sergeant barked. Moments later the young Lieutenant stepped into the room with a frown. His eyes widened when he saw Jake. A cold shiver ran down Jake’s back. This was a man not pleased to see him there.

“Mr. Parker has just returned from up northeast of here. I wanted you to hear his report.”

“Of course, Sir.” the young man said, but something in the tone told Jake the man would have preferred to be anywhere but there at this moment.

Jake shrugged it off and began his story. He told them off why he had come down from Oregon and giving a good description of Both Burk and the horse. But both men said there had been no reports about such a man.

“What can you tell me about the attack on the stage?” the colonel asked.

“Not much. Maybe a dozen. Half with rifles, the other half bows. I can tell you they were all wearing war paint. Red and black under the eyes.”

The colonel grimaced. “That means it is war and not just a raid. Three thousand warriors. That is all they have from Mexico to Kansas. And we can’t stop them. That’s all they have, and still, they can’t be brought to heel.”

“Maybe war with the Mexicans.” The lieutenant said. “Ever since Mexico put a bounty on the Comanche, they’ve been wanting to hurt them. That’s why they left this area. They’ve gone south to Mexico.”

“Maybe,” the older man said as he stared off into the distance.

Jake scoffed and shook his head. “They ain’t left.”

“How do you know,” the Lieutenant barked before he could stop himself.

Jake froze, he had almost been called a liar. Shaking his head, he turned to the Colonel. “Four days ago, I saw a brave riding from the west to the east, a few miles north of Wild China Pond. Then after leaving Castle Gap, I crossed sign, maybe forty warriors going southwest.”

“Forty?” the lieutenant said with disbelief. “How can you be so sure.”

Jake looked at the colonel and lifted an eyebrow.

“Lieutenant, this man was raised by Zion Campbell. If you had any knowledge, that would be enough. But his brother was raised by the same man, and I never knew a better tracker. The man could track last week’s clouds over cold rocks. If Jake Parker said there was forty. I would wager it was true.”

The young man’s face turned red, obviously displeased to be chastised. Especially in front of Jake.

Jake stood then held out his hand to the Colonel. “I will let you get on with your officering. Just wanted to stop in and say hey. Also, Luke would kill me if I didn’t.”

Colonel Forrest smiled as he shook his hand. "Please pass along my greetings to both Luke and Zion. And tell your sister I still haven't come across better biscuits."

Jake nodded and started to leave then turned back. "I do have a question. If I come across some rustlers, what am I supposed to do with them?"

The old man frowned. "You mean if you don't kill them outright." Jake nodded. "Well, then bring them here. Texas is still technically under Marshal Law. They will be tried by a military tribunal then hung. It doesn't take us long to build a gallows."

Jake thought for a moment then smiled, maybe he could have the army do his killing for him. Mary Rose would approve of that. "I will do that Colonel. Perhaps we will be seeing each other again." Then turning to the Lieutenant, he gave the man a quick nod and left without shaking his hand.

"Jake," the Colonel called after him. "If your man shows up, I'll get word to you."

It took effort not to scoff. Burk was like a ghost and probably already out of the country.

Chapter Eighteen

Mary tucked the picnic basket behind the wagon's seat and turned to examine Tom and Amy. They were wearing their best. Thank God, Donald had returned their things. She despised the idea of attending church with her brother in patches.

She had spent the last three days washing and letting out hems just to make sure everything was perfect.

Stopping for a moment she turned to look down the road. So much might depend upon this day. Donald would press her for an answer. The women in town would want to know everything about her and the children. She would be judged today and if found wanting, her life here would be much harder than it had to be.

A new worry filled her; she was from the north. Many of these women would have lost men fighting for the south. The Colonel's wife might be the only other northerner in town. But there was more. She was unmarried and might be perceived as a threat.

Perhaps it might be wiser to marry Donald. She need not worry about provincial prejudices.

"Mary," Tom called from the front door, waving for her to hurry.

"You tell Amy to leave those chickens alone. They will be perfectly fine for a few hours," she told her brother and began for the house. What now? She wondered as she stepped in to find her uncle bent at the waist, coughing into his handkerchief.

"Uncle? Are you all right?" she asked with concern. His face had turned red, and he couldn't stop coughing.

Holding up a hand telling her to wait a moment he coughed again then took a deep breath and stood up straight. But not before Mary saw red in the handkerchief.

"I'm fine."

"No you're not," she said as she came to him and rest a hand on his shoulder. "That was blood. You are not fine. You need to rest. We can go to church next week."

A sadness crossed his eyes as he studied her. "I should have told you. The reason I didn't want you to come."

Her heart hitched with worry.

"Consumption," he said as a look of emotional pain spread across his face. "It ain't mesquite pollen like I said. I went to see the Army doctor a year ago. He said I had maybe a year. I'm already two months past that."

"No," Mary gasped.

Shrugging, he folded his handkerchief and pushed it into his back pocket. "It is what it is."

A sadness filled her as she looked at the man. Why hadn't she seen the signs? The coughing. The weakness, lethargy, the pale skin. They had all been there, but she had refused to see. "I am so sorry. What can we do? There are places. Sanatoriums."

A weak smile crossed his lips. "I'm too far gone."

A silence fell over the room as she desperately tried to find a solution.

"I'm so sorry Mary Rose. I didn't want to put this on you."

"On me?" she asked. "What about you. It is you we need to worry about."

Resting his hand on the arm of his chair, he gingerly lowered himself into the seat. "I didn't want you lot to come. But I am glad you did. A man should have his family with him at a time like this."

Her heart broke, his family. There was just the four of them. She had no one else to turn to. And now this man was being taken from her.

"You sit there, rest," she told him. "I'll unload the wagon."

"No," he said holding up his hand. "We are going to town. You need to see that young man. That officer. He's sweet on you. If you work your cards right, He'll ask you to marry him."

"He already has," she replied as a new pain tore at her heart. Shouldn't she be excited? Shouldn't she be hoping with bated breath to be married to such a man? But instead, there was just an emptiness inside of her that she feared would never be filled.

"Good," he said as he let out a long breath. "There ain't anything here for you lot. The ranch ain't worth enough to cover the note at the bank. The heard is half gone, and you should be the wife of a rich man."

Mary looked off into the distance for a second as a new set of worries filled her. When her uncle died there would be nothing for them. She would be alone in this world with no home and no one to lean on.

"You don't worry about that now," she said as she knelt down in front of him. "We are going to get you better. I promise."

Snorting, he shook his head. "Don't you be counting on that?"

Reaching up, she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him as the tears began to fall.

"Don't be worrying," he said as he rubbed her back. "You got two

good men sniffing around your skirts. You won't be alone."

"Two?"

"That Jake Parker. A good man, the best. And the lieutenant."

"Jake?" she said with a deep frown. "He left and I won't ever see him again."

Uncle Ben laughed then started coughing again. Once he was back in control, he shook his head. "A man like Jake Parker doesn't look at a woman the way he looked at you unless he is interested. What is more, a man doesn't walk away from a woman like you. Not if he has any sense and Jake didn't strike me as an idiot."

Her heart melted at her uncle's compliment. But could it be true? Was Jake interested enough to come back? She thought about their kiss in the barn. The feel of his body against hers. The taste of his lips. But most of all, she thought about the passion she had seen in his eyes. Was it enough?

"What would your mother tell you to do?"

She snorted as she wiped away her tears. "She'd tell me to grab Donald and never let go."

"But, you don't love him," her uncle said.

"How do you know," she asked with obvious curiosity. "Is it that obvious?"

Her Uncle shook his head. "A person can't love two people at the same time. And you are in love with Jake Parker."

She didn't have the heart to deny it. Her uncle had easily seen the truth.

"But Jake isn't here and Donald is," she said with a resigned sigh. "Jake hasn't ever discussed marriage, Donald has. Jake is an adventurer at heart. It will always be another intrigue, another mission for him. Donald will be home every night."

Her uncle studied her for a second then shook his head. "Sounds like a major selling point. Steadiness."

"But it is," she said. "Mother ..."

Her uncle shook his head. "I never knew my sister to laugh as much as she did around your father. Her face would light up at his stories. She told me more than once that she was never bored living with him."

"Yes, but ..."

He cocked his head and studied her for a moment. "Think about it this way. Excitement or Boredom. Love or companionship. Laughter or money."

“There is just one problem you are forgetting.”

He lifted an eyebrow in question.

“Jake isn’t here. Perhaps I should be comparing companionship and money to nothing. A woman all alone in West Texas.”

Taking a deep breath, he shrugged. “Life is filled with decisions. And half the time we get them wrong. But if we knew which ones were wrong beforehand. Life would be too easy. If I’d known this was what it would be. I’d have taken love and laughter every time.”

Her heart shifted as she reached forward to hug him again. Here they were talking about her problems. But it was her uncle who was dying, yet he had tried to make things easier for her.

“I am glad we came,” she told him. “I am glad Tom and Amy got to know you. And I am glad that you are not alone.”

His eyes misted then he smiled. “Like I said, a special woman. Any man that gets you will have to consider himself the luckiest man in the world.”

The two of them held each other until her uncle patted her back and said, “If we are going to get to the services on time, we need to get going. They don’t like it if you walk in during the middle of the sermon. Even I know that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he said with a nod. “I can sit on a wagon box as easy as sitting here in this chair. Besides, it might be time for me and God to get reacquainted. Bible reading ain’t probably going to be enough.”

His glance over at the bible on the table told her so much. This was a man who knew the end was near.

Later that morning as the wagon drove through the gate of the fort, she still fought a dozen internal battles. Her uncle was dying. She must come to accept that. There would be nothing for her and the children. Again, she needed to start making plans. Plans that were based on sense, not emotion.

At the far end of the fort, a small building with a wooden cross on top indicated their destination. Several people were milling about outside the door. Men in uniform. A few civilians, and four women, each with a parasol against the hot sun.

Donald stood talking to an older gentleman. Her heart didn’t jump. Instead, it felt as if it had been tied down by a great weight.

He smiled widely when he saw them. Leaving the gentleman, he came to them, tipped his hat, and said, “Mr. Fulton, Mary. I am so glad you could come.”

Was this man to be her husband, she wondered. Would she spend

the rest of her life waking up next to him? He was handsome, well-formed, and wealthy, she added. Don't forget wealthy. But he wasn't Jake.

"Lieutenant Stapleton," she said with a smile as she let him hand her down off the wagon. She noticed that he didn't help Amy down. It was as if he wasn't even aware of anyone else besides her and himself.

Tom helped Amy down then the two of them joined her as their uncle guided the wagon to the side where he could tie off the horses.

"There is someone I want you to meet," Donald said as he tucked her arm into his and guided her to the church. Both Tom and Amy followed, their eyes wide as they took in everything about the fort.

"Colonel Forrest," Donald said to the older officer he had been talking to. "May I present Mary McCain. The woman I was telling you about."

The distinguished Colonel smiled at her and said, "Miss McCain. I have heard a lot about you. And it appears we have a mutual friend."

Mary frowned in surprise.

"Jake Parker was telling me just the other day about your adventures."

"Jake?" she gasped as her heart jumped. He was still alive. He wasn't lying dead in some gully somewhere. A feeling of happiness filled her, knowing that he was well.

"Yes. I knew him as a boy. It was nice to see that he had grown into such an admirable man. My soldiers tell me that he rode back into danger to help them."

She couldn't stop from smiling. "That is Jake Parker. He will always be riding into danger."

The Colonel smiled, "It will take men like him to tame a land like this."

Mary could only nod as her mind raced. Jake was alive. And in town only days earlier. Why hadn't he come to the ranch to see them? He must know that he would be welcomed.

She was still wondering about this when she caught a deep frown on Donald's face from the corner of her eye. Yes, she must remember. This was the man who wanted to marry her, she must be careful not to ruin that option.

"Donald," she said as she slipped her arm into his. "Will you sit with us."

His frown was immediately replaced with a large smile. "It would be my honor."

She sighed as she let him lead her to the church. A church she might very well be married in she realized.

Deep in her soul, a sadness threatened to engulf her. If Jake was in the area and hadn't bothered to come to visit, she might have no other choice but to marry Donald. Perhaps she was being silly to think she ever had a choice. Donald was here. Jake was doing what Jake did, riding into danger.

Chapter Nineteen

Jake pulled Pepper to a halt on top of the ridge and looked out over the country. God, Burk, and his crew could be anywhere, he thought with a gut-churning doubt. Five days and he hadn't seen a sign of them anywhere. No smoke indicating a campfire. No cattle gathered or horse sign cutting in behind a rancherous bull.

Nothing.

Flat land broken by dry washes. Sagebrush, and cactus with the occasional mesquite tree. Laughing he shook his head. More bush than tree if you asked him. Especially when compared to the big Ponderosa pines back home.

What would Mary think about Oregon?

Shaking it off he sat and tried to work out where the men he sought might be. Riding in big loops he had searched for any indication of four men. He'd found three different seasonal tanks where the cattle watered. But they would be dry soon and the beasts would probably start working themselves towards the Pecos.

Leaning forward he patted the horse's neck and said, "We'll find a place to bed down soon."

Pepper's ears wiggled in agreement.

He was about to pull the horse to the right and down the ridge when a distant movement caught his eyes. Freezing, he studied a distant herd, maybe fifty head. Had someone gathered them?

His heart sank. It wasn't cattle but buffalo. Again, that doubt began to dig into his soul. Was he on a fool's errand? Maybe Burk had already left the country and he'd never find his trail. What is more. Every day he was out here was a day away from Mary Rose.

Again, he shook his head. It didn't do any good going down that path. The woman wouldn't be interested in a vagabond. She had let on more than once that she was looking for stability in her life.

His mind automatically drifted back to their kiss. He couldn't help but smile as his heart swelled. The woman could kiss that was for sure. She'd melted into his arms as if she belonged there.

No, he had a job to do. Maybe ... Maybe if he was successful, he could stop by their ranch. It would be the gentlemanly thing to do. Say a formal farewell before heading back to Oregon. It was the least he could do.

Sighing, he pulled Pepper to the right and started working down the ridge. All the while his eyes scanned the ground looking for any clues. At the same time, he would occasionally pull up and survey the

country around him. It wouldn't do to be caught unaware by a horde of Indians. He didn't care what that idiot Stapleton said. The Comanche hadn't gone to Mexico. They were still out there.

That night he built a fire for a cup of coffee and a pot of beans. When he had finished his meal, he kicked dirt over the fire and walked Pepper a good half mile out of the draw and around a bend to another small arroyo.

If someone had seen his fire's light or smelled the smoke. They wouldn't be able to find him in the dark.

Using the bright moonlight, he located a sandy patch, staked out Pepper, then curled up in his bed role, his rifle cradled in his arms, both pistols within reach.

A shift in the breeze woke him in time to see the sky starting to turn purple. Sighing he pushed back his blanket and started to rise when his heart slammed to a halt. Not a dozen feet away, an Indian crouched on his haunches staring with cold eyes, an army-issue rifle pointed at his gut.

Jake froze, the wrong move and he was dead.

"You are hard man to find," the Indian said with a cold voice.

Swallowing hard, Jake examined the man. A blue army shirt, loincloth, black hat with a single feather. Calf-length moccasins with a fringe. Something was different, his mind fought to understand. Why hadn't the man killed him in his sleep?

"Forrest says I am to find you," the Indian said as he stood up and began gathering sticks for a fire.

Letting out a long sigh, Jake felt life rush back into his soul. He wasn't going to die this morning. This was an Indian scout, working for Colonel Forrest. How had the man found him? A cold anger at himself began to build. Jake had worked hard to hide his trail.

Zion used to say that it was impossible to move across a land without leaving some kind of clue. The trick was leaving so few that only an expert could find them. Obviously, here was an expert. Colonel Forrest would have no other working for him.

Not only had the man found him. He'd snuck up on him in the night. He could have slit his throat, and no one would ever have known.

"Coffee," the Indian said as he pulled a single match from his breast pocket and started the fire.

Jake looked up at the sky, by the time the water was hot there would be enough smoke to be seen for miles.

The Indian glanced over at him. "Do not worry, the Comanche,

they are twenty miles to the west.”

“How can you be sure?” Jake asked before he could stop himself. Obviously, if this man was good enough to find him then he would know where the Comanche were, or he wouldn’t ever have started the fire.

“I am of the Tonkawa,” the man said. “My people have been fighting the Comanche from before the Spanish come. The Comanche learn the horse before my people. They raid and kill Tonkawa. Most of us are no more. My father ride with the Rangers. I ride for Forrest. The Comanche will not defeat the whites.”

“I am Jake, Jake Parker,” he said as he put the coffee pot on a rock next to the fire.

“Ekwan,” the Indian said simply.

“Well Ekwan. Why did Colonel Forrest send you to find me?”

The Indian studied him for a moment then said, “The man you hunt, with scar, he come to Fort Stockton two days after you left. With three other men.”

“Damn,” Jake cursed. He’d been wasting his time out here. Five days gone and the man was behind him the entire time. He would have to return to Stockton and see if he could pick up the trail again.

Without thinking he looked to the east where Mary Rose was.

“Your woman,” the Indian said, “she is well,”.

“My woman?” Jake barked.

“The McCain woman, she visit fort. Talk to the Colonel. And then the young Lieutenant take her to springs to eat meal.”

Jake fought against the bile rising in his throat at the thought of Mary spending any time with that idiot. “She is not my woman.”

The man crouched down and shifted the pot to a hotter spot then looked at him and cocked an eyebrow. “I believed you to be smart man. You know sign. Can see things that are barely there.”

“What does that have to do with anything. Miss McCain is not my woman.”

The man studied him for a moment then said, “You whites, I will never understand.”

Jake shook it off. He wasn’t going to get into an argument with a strange Indian in the middle of the desert. Especially not about Mary Rose.

The two of them waited in silence for the coffee to get hot. Jake reached into his bag and pulled out a large hunk of pemmican and offered it to his guest. Ekwan tore off a piece then pulled a small bag

from beneath his shirt and shook out a handful of pecan nuts into Jake's hand.

Again a silence surrounded them.

"What can you tell me about Burk. The man I hunt. I was told they were coming to this country to steal cattle."

Pouring a cup of coffee, the Indian sighed heavily after taking a drink. "The only good thing your people bring to my country."

Jake bit his tongue; he had learned long ago you couldn't push too hard. If the Tonkawa were anything like the Piute or Yakima back home, they would clam up and he'd get nothing.

A silence fell over the two of them as Jake waited.

Finally, 'Ekwan sloshed the dregs then tossed them off to the side, rising. "I must return, Forrest will want to know that I find you."

Jake frowned, "Your horse?"

The man almost smiled. "I go farther than horse." The man nodded then started up the arroyo. He had gone only a few yards when he turned back. "The men you hunt follow the Pecos. Why, I do not know. Easy water perhaps."

"The Pecos?" Jake said, forty miles away, what was he doing here of all places.

"If you ride east, you will find their trail. You I think know how."

"You do not want to come with me?" Jake asked.

The man stared at him for a moment then shook his head. "I think there will be killing. It is not good for an Indian to kill a white man, it not end well, even if that man deserves to die."

Jake nodded, perfectly understandable, besides this was his fight, he'd have to do it alone.

East, he thought with a deep disappointment. Away from Mary Rose.

He watched 'Ekwan disappear around a bend and felt again the shame of being caught like that. Zion would have chewed his butt for letting it happen. Had he become soft, lazy, or had he been thinking about Mary too much? Had he allowed thoughts of her to distract him from being careful?

Once he kicked dirt over the fire, he saddled Pepper and started for the east into the rising sun. His woman, the man had said. The thought bothered him to his very core. Indians saw things. Saw the truth before anyone else, and they were never wrong. Not when it came to reading sign or people.

As he rode, he couldn't stop thinking about what and who he was

leaving behind. Again, he wondered if he was being a fool. Focusing on Ian's killer instead of the woman who could make his life have worth.

The turmoil in his gut told him it wasn't an easy decision. Justice or happiness.

Still, he rode away. He couldn't pass up this opportunity. Besides, he was being a fool for even thinking Mary Rose might be interested in him.

And then the thought of that idiot lieutenant jumped to the front of his mind. Grinding his teeth, he urged Pepper to hurry bringing him up to a steady lope.

Of course, the man had taken a meal with Mary. The man obviously saw quality. Every man in the territory would see it and be after her. Women like Mary Rose were few and far between. Especially out here.

The thought ate at his guts. Mary smiling at other men. His jaw began to ache from clenching it so tight for so long. He almost pulled Pepper to turn around and ride for the ranch, but he forced himself to keep going to the Pecos.

A new anger at Burk was added to the list. Killing Ian. Making him chase him halfway across the nation. And now, keeping him away from Mary Rose. Really, the man deserved more than he could possibly get.

Chapter Twenty

Mary pulled the loaf of bread from the stove and set it aside to cool. Her stomach clenched. Donald was coming today. They had agreed after the picnic that he would visit today. A nervous shiver traveled down her spine. He was pressing her for an answer.

Again, she couldn't wrap her mind around the idea of marrying a man she didn't love. A man she barely knew. And why her? A man like Donald, wealthy, a soldier, handsome, he would have no problems finding a wife upon his return to New York.

Why her? Why now? Was it because he believed she had no choice? That she would be easily managed. Desperate, alone. He might be correct but that was not a good basis for a happy marriage.

A thousand worries tugged at her. Donald, marriage, Uncle Ben was getting worse, Tom and Amy deserved more. Really, did she have a choice?

No, she realized as she stepped out of the kitchen and looked south.

Colonel Forrest had said that Jake was headed south looking for his man. Why hadn't he come for a visit? Really, they weren't that far out of the way. Couldn't he have sacrificed a little of his time on the hunt to come let them know he was well?

Obviously not, she realized as a coldness filled her with a sense of abandonment.

Sighing, she hugged herself as she sniffled to hold back a tear. Jake wasn't coming back she realized. Her dreams were not going to come true. That really only left one option. Donald.

Clenching her teeth, she returned to the house and checked to make sure both Amy and Tom had finished their schoolwork.

"I want the house looking particularly clean," she said to Amy. "You will help me. Tom, I want the yard picked up, the wood stacked, the corral raked and mud around the water trough removed.

Her brother frowned as he studied her for a long moment. "Are you going to marry that lieutenant then?"

She sighed as she looked off into the distance. "Maybe."

Amy glared at her and said, "What about Mr. Parker. It isn't fair. Jake saved us. He deserves to get you."

Mary could only shake her head, "that isn't how it works Amy."

The little girl frowned. "Yes, it is. That is exactly how it works. The handsome prince saves the princess, and they live happily ever after. All the stories say so."

Biting back a tear, Mary looked down at her sister and sighed. The girl was a born romantic. Even now she was looking up with large eyes pleading with her older sister to have a storybook ending.

The little girl would never understand. A gut-wrenching thought filled her head. She did not want Amy to go through life with an unreal expectation. She needed to be able to accept reality. "Not all princes want to marry," she said hoping that would help the girl grow up.

Amy frowned then shook her head, "When my prince rescues me. I won't let him walk away. He will marry me, or I'll tie him up until he does."

Tom laughed at his sister, "That won't work. A man that would let you tie him up ain't a man worth marrying."

Mary glanced at her brother. He wasn't wrong, but when did he become so wise. "Isn't," she corrected her brother. Since coming west his language had slipped.

"Regardless," she continued, "If Lieutenant Stapleton and I marry. Things will be different; we will move to New York. Tom, you will attend university in a few years. Amy, you will live in a big house with lots of friends.

Both Tom and Amy frowned. "I don't want to live in a big house," Amy said as she shook her head. "Who will take care of the chickens?"

Rolling her eyes, Mary pointed to the door for Tom to get started then handed a dusting cloth to Amy. "And be quiet, your uncle is resting."

Tom and Amy both looked at each other and Mary knew instantly that they both were aware of his illness.

Couldn't they see that she must marry? The three of them couldn't run this ranch, especially not with the bank breathing down their neck. What did they want from her? She would be doing it for them. The least they could be was a little grateful.

Again, that sickness rose in her throat.

Several hours later, Tom came back inside to inform them that Lieutenant Stapleton was coming.

Mary removed her apron then checked her hair to make sure everything was where it should be.

Stepping down from the chair she had been using to reach the top shelf, Amy glanced at her sister then shook her head. "I need to check on the chickens," she announced as if there would be no argument.

"Be back quick," Mary said. "And I want you both on your best behavior, do you understand."

“Yes, Mary Rose,” they both answered.

She looked around to make sure everything was as it should be then knocked on her uncle's door. He was sitting up in his bed, reading his bible. God, he doesn't look good, she thought to herself. His skin had taken on a pasty appearance, and he had become even thinner.

“Donald is here.”

Her uncle grimaced then shook his head. “You will have to entertain him,” he said with a sad smile. “I don't think I am up to it.”

Concerned, she rested the back of her hand on his forehead to check for a fever. Staring down at him she gave him a weak smile and said, “I will have Amy bring you your dinner.”

“No need,” he said as he waved his hand. “Ain't hungry.”

Her heart broke. She knew it would do no good to argue. The man was dying. Let him do it as he wished.

“I'll let Donald know and I'll be back to check on you.”

He nodded, “You let me know when you two come to an agreement. I'll want a few words with the man.”

All she could do was sigh and nod. An agreement he said. Would she agree today, or would she wait?

Why wait she wondered. Things were not going to change. She must come to accept the inevitable. Donald would not wait forever. Still, she couldn't finalize her thoughts. Something held her back.

No, she realized. She must grow up and do what was right. Tom and Amy deserved that much.

When she stepped outside, Donald pulled his horse to a halt and dismounted easily. He is handsome, she thought. Dashing, and wealthy, she reminded herself. Don't forget wealthy.

“Donald, it is so nice of you to come all this way.”

He smiled, obviously pleased to see her. “Mary, it has taken every bit of willpower not to come earlier.” He stepped closer and took her hand as he stared down into her eyes, obviously wanting an answer.

Her cheeks grew warm as she looked away. “Won't you come in? Uncle is feeling poorly and won't be able to join us.”

The young Lieutenant nodded. “Tom,” he said as he handed the reins to the young boy then held the door open for Mary to precede him.

Mary caught a frown from Tom as he looked at the young officer then down at the reins in his hand. She could read that look, that look that asked when did I become your servant. The boy was about to say

something when Mary shot him a quick frown and shook her head.

Tom shrugged his shoulders and led the horse to the barn.

When they were inside, Mary realized she was alone with this man. The first time since their walk in the desert. Again, he took her hand and raised an eyebrow.

She knew what he wanted. An answer. Her stomach roiled with angst as she looked up into his eyes. Yes, she needed to tell him yes. Really it was the only answer.

Still, he looked at her, waiting.

Mary paused for a moment then said, "After church. I will give you an answer after church this Sunday."

The smallest hint of an angry frown crossed behind his eyes. "Why the delay Mary. Either this makes sense, or it doesn't."

She couldn't answer him. He was right, everything said that she should accept his proposal. She was a fool not to. But the words couldn't come. But she knew that they would have to after Church. She had established a deadline. A final marker that could not be ignored or delayed.

"I just need a little more time," she told him as she reached up to touch his arm. "Please."

His brow furrowed. "Is it that Parker fellow?"

"What? No!" she said trying desperately to sound sure of herself.

He continued to frown. "He's halfway to Del Rio by now. The man he is after is leaving this area. He won't be coming back."

Mary's heart broke at the truth in his words. She could see it in his eyes.

"No Donald. I assure you. It is not Mr. Parker. Or any other man for that matter. It is just that I need time to know for sure."

"Know for sure?" he said with a smile. "That means you are leaning towards yes and just need time to get the last bit of the way there."

She looked up into his eyes and sighed. "Yes, I am leaning towards yes. As you said, I just need a bit more time to know for sure."

His smile widened, "Great, I can live with that. At least until Sunday when you finally agree."

Again, her heart hitched. When she agreed to this marriage, she knew her life would never be the same. Better or worse, it would not be the same. It would not be hers.

Chapter Twenty-One

It wasn't hard to find their trail. Jake sat on Pepper and studied the tracks. Maybe a hundred head and four horsemen. The heard had been gathered well south of the Fulton place. He was certain none of Mary's Uncle's cattle had been taken.

Looking closely, he studied the tracks. Yes, there it was. A shoe with a missing nail. Right rear. Ian's horse. He'd been following that track all the way down from Oregon.

They'd gathered a heard. Stolen them and were headed south. Probably to Del Rio. Somewhere along the way, they had changed their plans.

Smiling to himself he studied the river. They'd crossed here and taken the heard south.

"We're getting close," he said to Pepper as he swung down and started removing his clothes. A day, maybe two behind. He stuffed his pants and shirts into his boots and tied them to the saddle then gingerly made his way across the rocks in his bare feet.

Leading the horse into the water he smiled. Cold, but not Oregon glacier melt cold. This was actually refreshing instead of bone chilling.

The river took his feet out from beneath him. He grabbed the saddle horn and let Pepper swim them across the river. Once up and out on the far side he quickly got dressed and remounted the horse.

"Come on," he said as his heart jumped. He was so close, he felt that familiar worry of any hunter as he got close to his prey. A mix of anticipation, hope, and worry. Would they be where he expected? Would they get spooked and run? Could he finally end this endless chase?

Bending over the saddle he studied the trail and kept Pepper moving. Even after sunset, the moon was bright enough to follow the trail. Finally, though, after moonset, it became too dark and too risky. If he lost the trail, he might end up miles off and take days to find it again.

Guiding his horse down to the river he let him take a drink and rest then wrapped himself in his bedding and caught a quick nap. But he was up and mounted before first light. That constant tension across his shoulder blades as he drew closer.

It was noon before he saw the dust cloud. Slow-moving. Cattle. Not Indians. Not a wagon, not wild animals. Cattle.

Smiling to himself he nudged Pepper forward. As he approached, he started to come up with a plan. He needed to be careful. These

were dangerous men. Men who knew if they were caught it would mean a rope. They would kill first and ask questions later.

Pulling back on the horse he let the cloud of dust pull away. He knew where they were going. Walking Pepper, he kept the cloud in sight but didn't approach. After the sun went down, he pulled off into the brush and tied off his horse. Choosing a weak branch on a mesquite tree. If something happened to him Pepper could tug free and take care of himself. If the horse had any sense, he'd head back to Ben Fulton's ranch.

The thought made him hesitate. What was Mary doing that very moment? For a second, his mind drifted to what might have been. But shaking his head to clear it of dangerous thoughts he forced himself to focus on what needed to be done.

This wasn't the first time he'd faced rustlers. He'd been sixteen the first time and he'd killed a man. A memory that still hurt. But there hadn't been a choice, it had been kill or be killed, plain as day.

The man had been fast, but Jake had been faster. Zion had taught him well.

Patting Pepper, he slipped his rifle from the scabbard and made his way through the dark. It wasn't hard finding the heard. Between the occasional bellow of an angry steer and the stink of a hundred cows too close together. He couldn't have missed them if he tried.

The camp's fire had been allowed to die down but gave off enough glow to show three men rolled up in their bedding. Three? Quickly he turned to observe the herd, searching through the moonlight for the fourth rider.

He watched until he was sure there was not another rider. Shaking his head, he looked at the sleeping men. Typical thieves. Lazy. They didn't care if this lot was taken from them. They'd just steal more.

Which one was Burk? Or had the man slipped away again. His gut hardened as he crept towards the camp. Crouching, he watched them. The memory of 'Ekwan flashed into his mind. Should he wait until morning? Sit on that boulder and wait for them to wake.

No. That wouldn't work. Not with these three. Instead, he crept into the camp, pausing after every step. Carefully avoid sticks and stones. Anything that might give him away. His rifle ready if they woke.

When he got in close enough, he studied the situation. Each of them had a gun within reach. The far one had his in his hand clamped to his chest.

Jake continued to study the situation then took a deep breath it was now or never. The sooner he got this over with the better. But a

memory of Mary jumped into his mind. If he was killed in the next few minutes. He would never again see her smile. Never hear her soft laugh or stare into those eyes.

A sudden fear filled him as he realized how much he might lose. But duty and justice were too important to ignore, pushing aside any regret, he slowly walked forward and carefully removed the gun belt from the sand, watching the man for any indication he was rousing.

Nothing, he was out hard.

Turning, he got the second belt again without disturbing its owner. Once he'd draped the belts over his shoulder, he carefully made his way to the third man, the one with the gun in his hand.

Placing the rifle barrel against the man's forehead, he thumbed back the hammer with a loud click.

The man's eyes opened with pure terror.

Jake held a hand to his lips then nodded to the gun in the man's hand.

For a brief moment, he saw something in the outlaw's eyes that told him he was not going to give up easily.

Jake pressed the point of his rifle into the big man's head and stared down at him letting him know he'd finish him without the slightest regret.

Taking a deep breath, the man let the gun slip from his hand.

Jake kicked it to the side then said, "Wake 'em up. We got things to talk about."

The man's eyes narrowed as he tried to understand then sighed heavily and threw his blankets back. "Earl, Porter, wake up."

Jake watched as the other two grumbled and slowly climbed out of their bedding only to find a tall stranger covering them with a rifle.

Peering through the darkness, Jake's stomach dropped when he couldn't find Burk. No scar. Not a thickset man with black hair. Between the moonlight and the small fire, he would have recognized his quarry.

Grumbling under his breath he spat into the dirt. Waving the rifle, he motioned that they should stand together. "You lot got one chance to live. Tell me what I want to know or die here in this god-forsaken place."

All three swallowed hard then looked at each other. Jake could read their minds. Could they rush him? It was three against one.

"Don't think about it," he said as he shook his head. "All three of you will be dead before you get two feet. I promise."

The rustlers glared with pure hatred. These were tough men with their backs against the wall. Like any wild animal, they would lash out at the smallest opening.

“Far as I can tell,” Jake said as he nodded to the heard. “Them ain’t your cattle and I doubt you got a bill a sale.”

“What is it to you,” the big man said. “They ain’t yours either.”

“They are now,” he said. “You lot stole them. I’m stealing them from you. The difference is I’m going to get them back to their owners.”

The big man’s jaw tightened as his fingers clenched into a fist. Jake could see it in the man’s eyes he wanted to punch something, anything, preferable Jake. He was the dangerous one. The one the others would follow.

“Where’s Burk?” Jake asked, holding his breath while he waited for an answer.

“Who,” the youngest said.

“Thick man, black hair, scar along his chin.”

The big man laughed. “He called himself Nate Johnson, left yesterday. Said there was a man chasing him and he could feel him getting close. Said you’d chased him all the way down from Oregon. That right?”

“Yes,” Jake snapped as he fought to keep the anger from bubbling over. The man was a ghost. A sick feeling of failure filled him. “Where’d he go?”

The big man laughed again. “Ain’t no telling. It could be San Antonio, Denver, who knows. He didn’t say. Said we could have his share of the herd and took off. Headed east. But that was a day back. You’ll play hell finding his trail.”

The man smiled at Jake, obviously reveling in his failure.

Jake stepped forward and punched him in the gut with the tip of his rifle. “Wipe that smile off your face or I’ll do it for you.”

The man’s eyes grew dark with anger, but he was wise enough to stop smiling.

The youngest stepped forward, “said he was part Indian and could always tell when you was getting close. He tried every trick in the book to shake you but couldn’t give you the slip.”

Jake studied the man for a moment trying to discern the truth from the lie. But finally, he had to accept the truth. Burk was gone again.

“What about us?” the third member asked. “What you going to do

with us?"

Jake studied the three of them then pulled his tally book from his shirt pocket, "What are your names and where you from. And don't lie. I'll shoot the first man who I think is lying."

"Earl Benson," the youngest said, "From Kansas."

"John Porter," the other said, "From nowhere in particular. But born in Indiana."

"And you?" Jake asked while he used his rifle hand to hold the book as he wrote down the names.

The big man shrugged. "Cam Denton out of Denver. But it don't matter. Ain't no paper on me. No reward money."

Jake smiled. "There is now. Once I give these names to Colonel Forrest he will issue arrest warrants. Wanted posters will be sent to every fort and town between here and Houston. If I was you lot, I'd head up north, Ohio, Minnesota maybe, somewhere the army ain't in charge."

"You ain't going to take us in?" the young one asked with disbelief.

"Ain't got the time. Got a man I need to find. But I'll let you keep your horses. I won't put a man afoot out here."

"What about our guns?" the big man, Cam Denton asked.

Jake laughed. "Them I'm keeping. If I was you, I wouldn't run into any Comanche? They won't be so forgiving."

All three glanced at each other with pale faces and worry lines across their brow.

The three of them looked back at him, obviously wondering if it might be worth attacking even if just to get their guns back, none of them cherished the idea of crossing West Texas unarmed."

"If I was you lot," Jake said, "I'd be going before I change my mind and kill you where you stand. That way I don't have to ride back to Fort Stockton I can just leave you for the vultures to finish off. Two weeks and it will be as if you were never on this earth."

Without another word, each man grabbed his saddle and walked to his horse. Jake stood there, feet wide, rifle ready until they had ridden out of sight.

Glancing over at the heard he shook his head. No way he was going to get a hundred head back to their range. Not working alone. He just left them and let the local ranchers work it out come fall round up.

Sighing, he let his muscles relax for the first time since entering

their camp.

Now what, he wondered as he looked east then turned and looked back north. Was it even worth going after Burk? What about Mary? A feeling crept up his spine. A feeling of concern that she might need him.

A fight commenced in his gut. Burk or Mary. Which was the right answer. Either way, he was failing someone.

Untying Pepper he swung up into the saddle and turned east. If he was lucky, he would find Burk's sign sometime that afternoon.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Mary lit the kindling in the stove then stepped back. The sharp tang of woodsmoke quickly filled the kitchen. The fire would be ready for breakfast in only a few minutes.

Stepping out of the kitchen she looked to the rising sun and smiled. A purple sky blended with the distant horizon. She was going to miss the sunrises when she left here. Perhaps the only good thing about this place. It was doubtful that the days in New York would start so beautifully.

A hollow emptiness filled her. She had accepted the inevitable. Tomorrow she would tell Donald that she agreed to his proposal.

Her mind had overruled her heart. Really, there was no better decision.

Taking in a long breath she continued to look at the sunrise as she began to create a list of things she needed to accomplish if she was to marry then travel to New York. It would mean weeks on the stage then the train.

Weeks of getting to know Donald better. Perhaps, if she was lucky, she would come to love him.

Once the first draft of the list was complete in her mind, she turned to go back into the house. Uncle Ben needed to be informed of her decision. Perhaps he would be willing to come with them. He couldn't be left here alone. He wouldn't last three days.

Should she make his accompanying them a condition of her accepting Donald's proposal?

"Uncle Ben," she said as she knocked at his door.

When he didn't answer she sighed. The man was sleeping more and more. Carefully opening the door, she stuck her head in and said, "Uncle," then froze.

Her heart slammed to a halt as she looked at her uncle, his dead eyes staring up at the ceiling. "No!" she gasped as she rushed to his side. But even before getting there, she knew she was too late. He had that gray pasty look of death. Slack jawed, and unmoving eyes.

"No," she repeated as she slumped to her knees next to the bed. A sense of loneliness filled her. Once again, she had been abandoned. First by her parents. Then Jake, and now her Uncle Ben had left her alone.

"I'm sorry," she said as she took his cold hand in hers. "I am sorry we didn't have more time together. But you will not be forgotten. I promise."

Weeping into the bed covers she allowed her heart to melt. Everything was always wrong. An anger filled her at the unfairness of it all.

It was the noises of Tom and Amy rising that pulled her back to reality and the realization that she was responsible for making things better.

Standing up, she looked at her uncle. "I will be back in a bit," she whispered as if trying to reassure him that he would not be left alone.

"Mary?" Amy called from the living room.

Taking a deep breath, Mary Rose set her shoulders and forced herself to face what needed to be done.

"Amy, Tom," she said as she wiped at her eyes. "I need to tell you something."

Both of them stood there waiting, she could see it in their faces. The expectation of what she was going to tell them.

"Uncle has passed. In his sleep."

Tom cursed; Amy gasped.

"We expected this," she continued. "Not this soon of course. But he told me just the other day how glad he was that we had come to live with him. How peaceful it made him feel to know that he would not die alone."

The two children looked up at her with wide eyes, both trying to come to grips with what had happened.

"What now?" Tom asked.

She took a deep breath. "I need you to dig the grave somewhere nice but out of the way while Amy and I prepare the body."

"What?" Amy cried.

Mary Rose knelt down so that she could look directly into Amy's eyes. "It is time you learned. I did it for both Momma and Father. It helped in saying goodbye."

Amy bit her lip then nodded.

Turning to Tom, Mary gave him a weak smile. "Let me know when you are ready. But we need to hurry and get him into the ground before the heat hits us." A shudder ran through her at the thought of the smell of death permeating through the house. They'd never get it out."

Tom turned to leave then turned back and said, "I guess it is a good thing that Lieutenant asked you to marry him. You'll be saying yes now."

Mary grimaced then nodded. "I will."

The three of them looked at each other as they tried to see their future lives.

“Come on,” Mary said to her little sister. “We will need a bucket of water, soap, and two cloths. And bring in the towels from the wash line.”

Amy continued to bite her lip as she nodded.

Once they had what was needed, Mary opened the door and allowed Amy to enter. The little girl drew to a halt as she stared at the man that used to be her uncle. She let Amy take it all in, giving her time.

When her sister finally took a deep breath and looked up at her with questioning eyes, Mary squared her shoulders and took the bucket of water to the bed.

For the next hour, she and her sister worked in washing their uncle. Mary tied a cloth around his head to hold his jaw tight and used a bit of grease to keep his eyes closed.

As they worked in silence, Mary kept an eye on her sister, but the girl was holding up well. She would occasionally sniffle, but she didn't falter. A sense of pride filled Mary; her sister would do well in this world. She was able to face hardships and keep going. No weeping in the corner and wishing things were different.

When they had finished, she and Amy rolled the body to the side to slip a fresh sheet under him, then rolled him back.

“Get my sewing kit,” Mary said to Amy as she pulled the sheet over the body. After Amy had returned with the small sewing basket, she had the little girl hold the sheet in place as she used a barrel stitch to seal the shroud.

Stepping back, she thought of how she had done the same for both parents. Her mind drifted to memories that she wished she could forget.

“Thank you,” Amy said as she took her hand while still looking at the body on the bed. “It did feel like saying goodbye.”

“I pray we never have to do this again, but we probably will.”

Amy nodded. “He's not there. Not really.”

“No, he isn't. But he will always be in our memories. We can give him that.”

Amy nodded then looked up at her silently asking what next.

“Let's go check on Tom. We need to finish this.”

The little girl nodded then started for the door before turning and looking back at the shrouded body on the bed. “We love you,” she

whispered then hurried from the room.

Mary sighed heavily. Leave it to her sister to say the one thing that needed to be said. Returning to the bed she rested her hand on her uncle's chest and said, "Amy is right. We love you. And thank you for being our uncle."

There was no sound from the corpse. No acknowledgement, no returned declaration of love. Just a cold empty silence.

Grimacing, Mary left the room then stepped into the yard. Tom had selected a spot on a small rise fifty yards from the barn.

"How is it going?" she asked as she approached.

Her brother was filthy. The sweat on his face turning the dust and dirt into mud. He looked up at her with frightened eyes. "I can't get it deep enough. The ground is too hard."

Mary's heart dropped as she looked down into the hole her brother had dug. Six feet long, but only a foot deep. That would never be enough to keep the animals away. She immediately thought of the three men killed on the stage and how they had covered them with rocks. But even she had known that would be inadequate.

Tom sat on the edge of the hole and dropped his head into his hands.

He is only a boy, she reminded herself. A boy who felt the world of responsibility on his shoulders.

"Don't worry," she said as she rested a hand on his shoulder. "We will figure it out."

"How," he snapped as he looked up at her. "How. The ground is gravel and rocks packed together like a jigsaw puzzle."

"Here, let me try," Mary said as she dropped down into the hole.

Tom scoffed as he shook his head and handed her the shovel. She noticed that his hands had blistered. She would need to care for them later but now she needed to get her uncle into the ground.

Swinging with all her strength she tried to drive the shovel into the ground but failed miserably. It skidded across the top.

Again and again, she tried but quickly realized it wasn't going to work. Plopping down next to her brother the two of them looked down into the hole. Both lost in their own minds.

The thought of failing her uncle terrified her. She was about to get up and start again when Amy came running from the chicken coup and pointed up the road. "Man coming," she yelled.

Mary dropped her head and sighed. She didn't want to deal with Donald. Not now. Why couldn't the man have waited until tomorrow?

She was going to agree but couldn't she just mourn her uncle in peace.

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, she let it out slowly then rose, still standing in the half-dug grave. Lifting a hand to shield her eyes she watched as the man drew closer.

Slowly, ever so slowly, a nervousness began to fill her stomach as she forgot to breathe. That wasn't Donald. No, she would know those wide shoulders and gray hat anywhere.

"Jake," she whispered under her breath, unable to believe what she was seeing. Jake Parker was riding up the trail.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The warm wind blew in the smell of mesquite and sage, but she could only see Jake. Mary stood still, frozen in place, afraid if she moved Jake might disappear, a figment of her imagination.

But still, he grew closer, more real. That long lean body and wide shoulders taking up half the skyline. Finally, he pulled his horse to a halt and tipped his hat, "Mary Rose," he said, and her heart melted. God how she loved the way he said her name. As if it was an important name. Something of immense value.

His brow furrowed as he looked at the hole she stood in then glanced at the house. "Your Uncle?"

Nodding, she bit her lip. It was taking every bit of her strength not to throw herself into his arms.

He nodded and swung down from his horse. "Tom," he said to the boy, "can you do me a favor, I think I saw a pickax in the barn, can you get it for me?"

The boy nodded as he sprinted for the barn.

"And Amy," he said as he loosened the cinch then pulled the saddle off. "Can you take Pepper for me, give him a bucket of oats, but let him roll first."

Mary watched as her sister smiled up at Jake then glanced over at Mary with a knowing look before taking the reins and leading the horse to the barn.

"You came back," Mary said with a tone of disbelief. "Did you find the man you were after?"

She held her breath waiting for an answer while he stared off to the east and shook his head. "Not yet."

A sudden sadness filled her. He would be leaving again. He hadn't come back to rescue her one more time. No, this was just a friendly visit before he rode off out into the desert once more.

She stared at him, unable to believe he was there. She so wanted to reach out and touch him. Just to prove it to herself.

He looked at her and their eyes locked. She remembered their kiss. The way it felt to be carried by him through the desert, the way he always smelled of woodsmoke and leather. Of how his smile made her stomach flutter with happiness. A thousand memories filled her mind as she stared up at him. All of them good.

Looking past her, he said, "Thanks Tom," as he took the pickax from the boy and dropped into the grave. "You done got a good start. Now the two of us working together can finish 'er off."

With that, he brought the pick down with a mighty blow that rang across the yard like a smithy striking a plow blade.

Again, he lifted the ax over his head and brought it down. Mary could only stand there and admire the view. Something about a man working hard, his muscles tightening with each stroke.

After a dozen blows, he nodded to Tom, who dropped down into the hole and used the shovel to remove the loose rocks and gravel.

Mary could only stand and watch then realized, food! They would be hungry. Hurrying to the kitchen she restarted the fire and prepared a pot of chili. The room would become as hot as hades, but her people needed to eat. Besides, she could let it simmer until they were ready.

Stepping back out of the kitchen she glanced over at the grave and gasped. Jake had removed his shirt and was again swinging the pick. His tanned body glistening with sweat as he worked in the hot sun.

She could only stand and stare as thoughts of what might have been danced through her head.

No, she thought, it wasn't right to place her disappointment on him. He had never been anything but a gentleman. There had been no promises. Not even a hint of a promise. This fantasy was all her doing.

Finally, he climbed up out of the grave and grabbed Tom by the shoulder, and marched him to the water trough. The two of them used a rag to wash off the dirt and sweat. Then both dipped their heads into the trough and shook the hair out of their eyes.

She couldn't help but remember the first time she had seen this man walking out of the desert then dropping down and rinsing his head. It was a memory she knew she would never forget.

Once clean, he grabbed his shirt. As he tucked it into his pants he looked up and caught her staring. For the briefest second, he paused then finished dressing and came towards her.

"We've got it as deep as it will go. Hit bedrock."

"Will it be enough."

"Yeah, It will."

She sighed. One problem solved. Again, Jake had saved them.

"That is that, then," she said with a heavy sigh.

"Tom and I will get the body," he said with a sadness in his eyes that moved her. He knew how much this was hurting her and it bothered him.

Tightening her jaw, she nodded then waved Amy over. When the two brought the body out, she and Amy followed behind as they

carried it to the grave. They lay the body on the lip of the grave then both jumped in and lowered the body down.

Mary's heart tore into a dozen little pieces. It finally hit her. The truth. Her Uncle was gone. A tear slowly crawled down her cheek as Tom and Jake took turns filling in the grave. Each shovel of gravel was like someone raking fingernails across her back. Digging in, tearing at her flesh. But she stood there, her hand resting on Amy's shoulder.

When the last shovel full had been tapped down and the wooden cross driven into the ground, the four of them stood together, each alone in their own thoughts.

"He was a good man," Jake said.

"He took us in when we had no one," Tom said.

Mary wiped at her eyes. "He was my mother's brother and she loved him. She always said how he made the world a better place."

Amy stepped forward and laid a bouquet of desert wildflowers on the grave. "We will miss you, Uncle Ben," she said then stepped back.

Mary sighed, it was done. "Come on, you must be hungry."

And with that, the four of them turned for the house, their uncle buried but not forgotten.

As Mary served up the chili and cornbread she watched as Jake ate. Her heart hitched, she loved watching him eat the food she prepared. Again, a sadness filled her as she realized this might be the last time it ever happened. He might very well disappear like a puff of wind at any moment. Off, chasing a phantom.

"That's good," he said with a smile as he looked at the pot, silently asking if he could have more.

Mary had to bite back a tear as she served up his second serving.

A silence fell over the table as each of them thought about the day. Why couldn't things have been different, she wondered. Why couldn't Jake have come back for her? Why couldn't her uncle still be alive? These and a hundred other regrets filled her.

"I need to check on the chickens," Amy said as she pushed away from the table then stared at her brother and said, "Don't you need to see to the horses?"

Tom frowned then seemed to realize what his sister was up to and quickly scooted away from the table. Mary didn't know whether to laugh or cry at her sibling's attempt at matchmaking. They didn't understand the futility. Obviously, Amy still harbored dreams of princes and princesses.

Mary started to clear the dishes, Jake immediately jumped up to

help. As he handed her a bowl, their fingers touched and a powerful surge of energy flashed through her body. She froze as she looked at him, then quickly averted her eyes so he did not see her feelings for him. A look of pity would have killed her.

"I will wash these later," she said. "Let's go for a walk. There is something I need to talk to you about."

He frowned for a moment then grabbed his hat and followed her out in the evening.

"Not that way," she said when he started down the same path she and Donald had walked. "This way," she indicated.

He shrugged then joined her. The two of them walked in silence as she fought to figure out a way to tell him that she was getting married. If he smiled, congratulated her. Told her how happy he was for her, she would surely dissolve into a puddle of pure sadness.

"Thank you again," she said. "It seems like you always appear when we need you. Once again you have saved us."

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

Again, they fell into an awkward silence. Glancing over she couldn't help but admire the view. A tall handsome man with two guns on his hips. She studied him for a moment and realized he needed a haircut. Oh, how she wished she could do it. Run her hands through his hair as she trimmed.

"Why did you come back?" she asked as she held her breath. "I thought you wouldn't stop until you got him."

Again, he shrugged. "Maybe I wanted some of your cooking."

Her jaw clenched, that was that then.

"What you going to do now?" he asked with a creased brow.

Taking a deep breath, she let it out slowly. "That is what I wanted to talk to you about. Lieutenant Stapleton has asked me to marry him."

She watched closely as he blanched and stopped walking, his brow furrowed even deeper as he asked. "What did you say to him?"

"I told him I needed to think about it. I have to give him an answer tomorrow."

"Stapleton?" he said as he shook his head. "The ... Do you love him?"

She frowned. "Does it matter? It is not as if I have a lot of options."

He turned to stare to the north for a long moment. Her heart stopped while she waited for his reaction.

“Stapleton?” he said again with a shake of his. “He ain’t good enough for you.”

Her heart started beating again, he hadn’t been pleased. “Oh, then who is?”

Shaking his head he said, “Ain’t no one good enough for you. Not that I ever seen. A woman like you deserves someone special.”

“A woman like me? What do you mean?”

Shaking his head, he said, “You must know you have to be about the prettiest woman in the world. With a spine as strong as steel and a heart that wants nothing more than to make other people feel better.”

She gasped as she stared up into his eyes.

“You make a man want to move mountains. Wars have been fought over a woman like you.”

They became lost in each other’s stare. “I am not special,” she whispered. “I am only a woman. Alone, who desperately wants to be with the man she loves. Even if it is a life filled with turmoil.”

His eyes clouded as he tried to work out what she was saying. An eyebrow lifted as he smiled down at her. “Mary Rose. For a woman like you. A man would be stupid to introduce turmoil. For someone like you, he’d settle down and never roam again.”

Her heart jumped. “Is that possible?”

Shrugging he said, “I saw it with Zion. When he married my sister. This was a man who had traveled over half the continent east to west, north to south. Now, you can’t get him off their homestead with a barrel of dynamite.”

Her heart raced as she looked up into his eyes, stepping closer, she put a hand on his chest. Was he serious? What exactly was he telling her?

“I ain’t got much,” he started. “And I can’t see settling down here in West Texas. Not after what I seen in the Oregon territory.”

“Yes?” she asked as she fought to remember to breathe.

“But ...” he started. “If you was wanting to get married. I could ...”

“Jake Parker!” she interrupted. “If you are asking me to marry you just so you can save me. I won’t have it. If I wanted a man I didn’t love, I could find one of them to rescue me just as easily.”

His eyes softened, “But what about a man who loved you. You ain’t ever going to find one that loves you more than me.”

Her world disintegrated into pure happiness as she stared at him, unable to believe what he had just said. He loved her. Was it true? Or

a way to get her to let him save her. She stared into his eyes, questioning, searching for the truth.

“I can think of only one way to convince you,” he said as he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

YES, she thought as she melted into him. He did love her.

Suddenly, a new fear filled her, pulling back she looked up at him. “What about the man you are after.”

He frowned for a long moment then shook his head. “He got away. I failed.”

“I am sorry,” she said as her heart jumped, filled with happiness.

He shrugged. “Ian would understand. I could spend my life chasing after Burk. Or I could spend my life with the woman I love. Believe me, he’d understand.”

Crying, she rested her head on his chest as she held onto him, terrified to ever lose him. “We will name our first son after him,” she whispered.

His arms squeezed her, letting her know that he agreed.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jake looked across the table and smiled at Mary Rose. Her cheeks grew pink as she quickly looked away but not before he had seen the smile on her lips. A smile that he knew he would do anything in this world to ensure it never left those pretty lips.

They had spent most of the night talking about their future. Which way they would take to get back to Oregon. They'd finally decided that it would be fastest to take the stage to Fort Worth, then catch the train north, then west to Reno, and another stage north to The Dalles on the Columbia River where he'd hire a wagon and drive them the last bit.

Her eyes had shined with happiness as he described the territory they were going to. The tall pines, the huge mountains that never lost their snow. The long green grass in spring and the summer winds coming down from the highlands.

Both Tom and Amy came out of their rooms rubbing their eyes, both of them surprised to see Jake and Mary sitting at the table holding hands.

"Tom, Amy," Jake began. "Your sister and I will be getting married. I thought you should know."

Amy squealed then slapped her brother's shoulder. "I told you. The stories never lie."

Tom frowned. "Aren't you supposed to ask my permission? I am the man of the family."

Jake felt Mary squeeze his hand with worry. He nodded at the young boy and said, "You are right, I probably should have. But I got to be honest. Ain't a force in this world could keep me from marrying your sister."

Mary smiled at him, a cat with a fresh bowl of milk kind of smile. Pleased with the world.

Tom thought for a moment then shrugged. "What's for breakfast," he asked.

Mary jumped up to start preparing a meal.

Jake laughed. He knew she was doing everything possible to smooth over ruffled feathers.

"There is one more thing," he said to her. "I was wondering if we could wait to get married until we got back home. It would mean a lot to Hannah."

She bit her lip for a moment and studied him. He could read her mind, was he wanting to back out. But at the same time, she was wise

enough to want to please his family.

Letting out a long breath, she nodded. "A wedding surrounded by our new family sounds wonderful."

"It means the lot of us are moving to Oregon," he told Amy and Tom. "And we have to leave today," he said. "The stage is scheduled for five this afternoon. The next one east ain't for four days"

"Today?" Mary gasped as she spun around.

Jake shrugged. "We'll take the wagon and Pepper, sell them at Fort Stockton. The bank can take the rest.

"What about the chickens?" Amy asked.

"Let them go free," Jake answered. "They are half-wild already. They will be fine until the bank can sell this place."

She pondered for a moment then nodded.

He looked down at the little girl and smiled. She had grown up in the last few weeks.

"Today?" Mary said as she looked off into the distance. "Can we leave early? There is something I have to do in town."

Jake frowned but he nodded, "You pack, and I'll hook up the wagon."

It only took a few hours, and they were ready to begin. The four of them looked back at the house then across at the fresh grave. His gut tightened. He was asking a lot, but Oregon called. Home. Smiling he couldn't wait until Hannah met Mary Rose. He knew his sister; she had never believed he would settle down. Boy how he was going to love proving her wrong.

Flicking the reins, he started the wagon for town. Glancing over he smiled at Mary. They were starting their new life together and he didn't believe he had ever been happier.

Mary bit the inside of her cheek as she wrestled with a dozen different worries. Things were happening too fast. Jake comes back. Says he loves her, and the next thing she knows she is on her way to Oregon. A thousand miles away.

Jake had no home of his own. She assumed they would homestead a small farm, hopefully, close to his sister and brother. She liked the idea of her children growing up near their cousins.

But, what if he changed his mind halfway there. He could get that need to wander and leave them on the side of the road. Alone, penniless.

She glanced over at Jake and smiled inside. No, Jake was not that type of man. One thing she knew with certainty, Jake would never abandon them. Her hero wouldn't know how.

"What do you need to do in town?" he asked, "You lot got more than enough clothes," he added as he glanced into the back of the wagon at the trunk and two carpet bags.

She took a deep breath; she had been avoiding this, but it couldn't be delayed. "I need to speak to Donald, Lieutenant Stapleton."

A quick anger crossed Jake's face, but he quickly pulled it in. Was he jealous? The thought sent a quick thrill through her entire body.

"I can tell him for you," he said with a hardness in his voice. "Nothing I would like more."

She laughed and shook her head. "No, this is something I have to do."

He studied her for a moment then reached over and took her hand, bringing it up so that he could kiss her fingers. "I understand," he said. "I don't like it. But I guess I understand."

Mary relaxed. He hadn't been angry at her but at the situation. And really could she blame him. If they were stopping for him to tell some woman goodbye she would have been upset, if not furious.

They continued on holding hands, both of them facing the world together.

When he pulled through the gate, she immediately saw the group gathered outside of the church. Her stomach clenched with worry as she saw Donald step away from the crowd a deep frown on his face when he saw Jake driving the wagon.

She immediately let go of Jake's hand and folded her own in her lap.

Colonel Forrest and his wife stood a little to the side, both of them

looking on with interest.

“Mary,” Donald said as he glanced again at Jake. “You are a little late the services are about to start.”

She felt Jake bristle next to her. She quickly placed a hand on his leg to calm him down. Donald noticed and raised both eyebrows.

Taking a deep breath, she said to Donald. “I won’t be marrying you, Donald. I am sorry if I lead you to believe otherwise. But you were right. It is Jake Parker. It always was Jake Parker.” Here she turned and gave her love a bright smile.

He smiled back then turned and glared at the young lieutenant. The two of them stared at each other as if they both wanted to kill the other. The tension was only broken when Colonel Forrest stepped forward and said, “Congratulations Miss McCain. Your future husband is a good man.”

“I know Colonel,” she said. “Slow sometimes, and oblivious to what is right in front of him. But I think I will take him anyway.”

The colonel laughed then nodded to Jake, “You tell your brother I said hello and that if I get up that way I’ll stop by.”

Jake smiled, “You are always welcome Colonel.” He then nodded one last time and flicked the reins to start the team in a wide turn. Mary did not look back. That part of her life was behind her. She felt no sadness nor shame. Donald had never loved her. She had been but a trophy to return home with. He would have no problems finding another.

Turning to Jake she smiled then slipped her arm into his and pulled herself close.

He smiled at her as they rode down the main street of town towards the livery station next to the stage.

Suddenly, an intense look crossed Jake’s eyes as he studied a group of horses tied outside a saloon. She noticed his jaw tighten and the muscle in his arm become rock hard with tension.

“What?” she asked.

“Burk,” he growled. “He’s in the saloon. That was Ian’s horse, plain as day. Didn’t you see the ZC brand?”

Her world crumbled as she realized what was going to happen. There would be no happy ending. Jake would die in a blaze of gunfire and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

“Jake,” she pleaded, “Don’t go. Can’t we just pretend you never saw that horse? Can’t we just go on with our lives?”

His firm jaw clenched even tighter as he pulled the stage into the alley next to the livery station.

“No, we can’t,” he said as he handed her the reins.

Jake felt that familiar anger beginning to build inside of him as he jumped down from the wagon. The anger that always gave him an edge in a fight.

“Please Jake,” Mary beseeched, “I’m begging you. If you love me, you wouldn’t do this.”

He looked at her as his heart broke. He knew what might happen. The thought of hurting Mary tore at his soul. Leaving her alone to face the world was beyond thinking about. But some things couldn’t be denied. He had a responsibility to Ian.

“You stay here,” he told her. “I’ll be back in just a bit.”

The pain in her eyes was like a knife to his guts. “If he comes easy,” he told her. “I’ll turn him over to the Army, between my testimony and the statements from the witnesses back home, it should be more than enough to get him hung.”

“Damn you, Jake Parker,” she yelled. “I don’t care about that man. He can rot in hell for all I care. But if you get yourself killed, I will never forgive you.”

He laughed, God she could be fierce. Something to remember. Upsetting a woman like Mary Rose could bring a passel of hardships to a man’s life.

“You lot stay here,” he told them. “Don’t be following me, thinking you can help. You will just get in the way and end up getting me killed for sure.”

She sighed heavily then said, “You listen to me, Jake Parker. You come back to me. You hear?”

He nodded as he turned up the street. Burk was here, finally. Had that sixth sense of his failed the man this time?

As he walked, he removed the thongs holding down his guns then pulled each one and spun the cylinder to make sure everything was as it should be then replaced them in their holsters, Resting them easily.

He’d go in without his guns drawn. Walking into a place like that with a gun out could get a man killed instantly, too many men with enemies. They’d shoot first and figure it out later.

When he reached the saloon, he stopped for a moment and took a deep breath, settling his nerves as Zion had taught him. Once he had everything under control, he reached for the batwing doors then froze.

Mary Rose, God, he would be cursed to hell if he left her now. Alone, with nowhere to turn. And he would spend eternity without her. The thought chewed a hole in his gut before he could push it

aside and focus on what needed to be done.

As he stepped into the saloon, he quickly ran his eyes over the crowd. A dozen cowboys. A Mexican waitress serving beers. An old bartender behind the bar cleaning a glass. He was surprised to see Sergeant Kennedy leaning on the near end of the bar.

The man nodded then leaned forward to whisper. "He came in just a bit ago, saw you go into the fort, figured you'd be in. I have been keeping an eye on him."

"Where?" Jake asked as he searched the room.

"There, at the back table, the man with the black hat and silver hatband."

Jake followed Kennedy's guidance and found the man. His head was dipped looking at the coins he shuffled in his hand, waiting for the next deal of cards. Then he looked up and their eyes locked. It was Burk, there was no doubt in Jake's mind. That scar was a dead giveaway.

"Burk," Jake called out as he started for the man. "You killed my friend and I'm taking you in."

Four cowboys at the table quickly pushed back their chairs to get away from the line of fire.

His prey froze as his brow narrowed. "You the one that's been chasing me?"

"All the way from Oregon. You killed the wrong boy. He was my friend."

The man frowned then shrugged. "I needed a horse and he had one. It weren't personal."

"It is now," Jake said then nodded, "Put both hands on the table where I can see him. We'll let the Army sort it out. But I got more than enough to see you hang."

Burk's frown deepened as he glanced at both of Jake's guns still in their holster. He then glanced around the room obviously trying to determine if anyone was helping his enemy.

"It's just me," Jake said. "More than enough for scum like you. And don't be thinking because my guns are holstered that you can draw fast enough. I ain't a boy on the back of a horse you can surprise."

The man scoffed, then the table exploded as he fired his gun from underneath. He missed, Jake didn't. His pistol appeared in his hand as if by magic. Two large holes appeared on the left shirt pocket of Burk just before he was hurled back out of his chair.

Jake held himself ready in case the man got up, but he knew he

had hit what he aimed for. The man's heart had been turned into mush.

Holstering his pistols, he turned to Kennedy. "You saw, I didn't have a choice."

Kennedy nodded. "There won't be any problems, I promise."

Jake nodded then turned for the door then stopped and said, "Sell the horse, use the money to get him buried."

Kennedy nodded.

As Jake stepped out, he looked up into the sky and let the sun warm his face. He was alive, and Mary Rose loved him. He had to be the luckiest man in the world.

When he got back to the wagon, Mary's eyes ran over him looking for wounds. When she found none, her shoulders slumped with relief. "Can we go to Oregon now?"

He laughed. God, he loved this woman.

Epilogue

Mary couldn't stop looking out the stage window at the snow-capped mountains. Oregon, they were finally here.

Three weeks on the road with Jake and she loved him even more if that was possible. Her only complaint was that they were not already man and wife. But she had agreed to wait. The last thing she wanted to do was upset her future sister-in-law. As Jake told it, she seemed rather stern, the matriarch of the family.

A wedding, the thought pleased her to her very soul. Would she have time to make a new dress? Both Tom and Amy needed better clothes. But she couldn't expect much. Jake was obviously not rich, and she refused to expect much from her new family.

After all, it was the bride's family who was supposed to pay for the wedding.

Where would they stake their claim for a homestead she wondered. In the forest? Or on the grassy slopes. These and a hundred other questions kept tumbling around in her mind. Oh, how she wished everything was settled and this turmoil would end.

But then she glanced over at Jake and felt her heart melt. A little turmoil was well worth it if Jake was in her life.

After the stage pulled into The Dalles, Jake quickly arranged for a wagon and team. He was just preparing to drive out of the livery stage when two men approached, both dressed nicely in fine suits.

"Jake Parker," one of them said. "Thought you was chasing dreams." Both men studied her with obvious interest.

"Curt," Jake replied with a laugh as he took her hand. "Let me introduce Miss Mary Rose McCain, the future Mrs. Parker."

Both men blanched with shock.

"You could say I caught my dream," he added with a smug smile.

"Ma'am," they both said as they tipped their hats.

As they rode away, she thought she heard one of the men say, "Them Parkers, they always were the luckiest men in this part of the country."

She couldn't help but smile. "Who were they," she asked.

"Curt Thompson, he's the banker in these parts. And the other was John Rawls, one of the two lawyers in town."

Mary took a deep breath as she slipped her arm into his then glanced back at Amy and Tom. "It is beautiful, isn't it?"

Amy's eyes were wide. "I didn't know mountains got that high."

“That tall one there is Mount Hood,” Jake told them. “Sometimes she rumbles like she’s got a dragon deep inside.”

Amy’s eyes grew even larger as she stared up at the giant coned mountain.

For two hours they rode on the trail before turning to climb up into a V-shaped valley filled with green grass and a small river rushing down the middle.

They continued up the road in silence. Mary looked over to find Jake smiling. He must be so happy to be home.

How much further she wondered. Her stomach was beginning to ache with worry the closer they got. Would his family like her? Would they be happy with him bringing home a strange woman and expecting them to accept her?

Finally, after they rounded a bend in the road, she saw in the far distance several buildings with smoke rising from two of them.

Within minutes, a rider was racing towards them. A young boy, no more than thirteen pulled his horse to halt making him rear in defiance.

“Uncle Jake,” he said with a heart-stopping smile. “We thought you was dead.”

Jake frowned, “Your father know you’re treating one of his horses like that?”

The boy laughed, obviously unworried about the chastisement. “He ain’t but half broke. This is the first time I’ve had a saddle on him. We’re both just discussing who will be in charge.”

Jake laughed. “Let your mom know I’m coming home. She does hate being surprised.”

The boy laughed then made the horse rear again, spin on a dime then race back to the ranch as if he had been born in the saddle.

“Who is that?” Amy gasped with large eyes.

“Esau,” Jake said, “Zion’s oldest. And Tom, you don’t be tangling with him. I know what boys are like and they got to put things in the right pecking order. But I’m telling you. That one is half mountain lion and half grizzly. You use that brain of yours to best him instead.”

“Esau Campbell,” Amy whispered as she looked after the boy. Mary balked. She knew that look. It was the look a girl gave a boy that she found interesting.

“Are all of your family members like that?” Mary asked half teasing and half not.

“No, they try, but none has matches, Esau, for wildness. At least

not yet. Although I'm thinking Luke's boy Jacob might give him a go, but the boy is only three so he might wise up."

"Jacob?" she asked. "Is he named after you?"

Jake laughed, "I don't think Rebecca ever thought I'd find someone, so I'd never be needing the name for one of my own."

Mary sat back as she tried to take it all in. As they drew closer, she realized that there were two houses, both two-storied with brick chimneys and porches that looked out over a green field and a large pond. In the back were several more buildings a big red barn, what looked like the bunkhouse, and two sheds. The corral was filled with a dozen horses, each looking like the finest of stock.

This was not a small homestead she began to realize as she looked down at her plain cotton dress. Oh, how she wished she had time to freshen up before they arrived.

Tucking her hair back up, she tried to calm her racing heart. What had she agreed to? Could Jake and she ever turn their homestead into such a fine ranch? It would be difficult; she was sure that the best land had been taken long ago.

Gripping her hands in her lap she anxiously waited until the wagon pulled to a stop in front of the first house. A dozen people were waiting for them. Two men, two women, and ten children, Esau with his arm draped over what was obviously one of his younger brothers. One of the women held a baby in her arms and was smiling as if all of her prayers had been answered.

"Jake," the older man said.

"Zion," Jake answered as the two men smiled at each other. That was all, two words and their bond had been reestablished.

"You get your man?"

"Yes, Sir."

Zion nodded then he smiled welcoming Mary.

Turning to her, Jake said, "Mary, Tom, Amy, let me introduce you to my family. That there is Luke and his wife Rebecca and their two children Jacob and Lilly. The old cuss there is Zion Campbell and his wife, my sister Hannah, and their children, you'll learn the names soon enough. I have a problem keeping them all straight."

The adults stared at her with obvious interest.

"Family," Jacob said as he smiled. "This here is Mary Rose McCain, her brother Tom and sister Amy. And unbelievable as it may seem, she has agreed to be my wife."

Both of the women squealed, Hannah handed the baby off to her husband then reached up to take Mary's hand. "Do you have any idea

what you're doing? If you want to escape, I'll have my Zion drive you back to town."

Mary gasped until she realized the woman was teasing her. "Yes, I know what I am taking on. But they do say, there isn't a horse that can't be broke. With Jake, it is just a matter of knowing how."

Hannah smiled up at her and nodded, "You are going to fit in well, sister."

Mary's heart melted at the happiness in Hannah's eyes. She was being accepted into the family.

After that, her world became a whirlwind of activity as their things were unloaded and she and her siblings were led into the house.

"Esau," Hannah said to her son. "You take Tom and Amy to the barn and show them around."

Mary saw Amy's eyes grew very big then she asked the young boy. "Do you have chickens?"

The boy frowned for a moment, "Do we have chickens. We got the meanest roster between here and Reno. Or at least that's what my dad says. The bird killed a rattlesnake just last week."

Amy's eyes grew even bigger as she stared up at the boy in front of her as if she had just found true heaven.

Mary watched as the children were led off.

Hannah smiled at her, "don't worry, Esau won't let anything happen to them. He's like his father, wild but a protective streak a mile wide."

"Now then," Rebecca said as she led her into the house. "When and how did you meet Jake."

Mary started to tell them about the stage attack and the Indians when she stopped and looked around. The inside of the house was beautiful. Hardwood floors. Large windows that looked over the porch to the pond below. Curio cabinets with glass facing and well-turned furniture.

A quick bolt of envy flashed through her until she remembered that these people had entered this valley with nothing but a wagon and built all of this.

"Your home is lovely," she said to Hannah. "And thank you so much for welcoming us."

Hannah waved her hand dismissing the compliment. "Did my brother say, going to be his wife? Am I to understand you are not yet married?"

Mary blushed and shook her head, “No, Jake said he wished to be married here. He thought it would make you happy.”

Hannah blanched for a moment then her eyes became misty as she shook her head. “Just when you think they can’t surprise you. He goes and does something like that.”

A warm glow filled Mary as she realized it had been the right decision. “After the wedding. I do hope we can find a homestead close to you.”

Hannah frowned then looked over at Rebecca. “Close? There isn’t anything close. We have a hundred square miles of range, and another big section of timber to the north.”

Mary swallowed; she hadn’t realized. That would mean they would be at least ten miles away.

“Besides,” Rebecca added. “Why would you want a homestead of your own? After all. A third of this ranch belongs to Jake. His house will be built just the other side of mine. That has always been the plan.”

“A house, like this, next to you?” Mary gasped.

Hannah frowned, “He didn’t tell you?”

“No, I just assumed.”

“Men,” Hannah said as she rolled her eyes. “He probably didn’t think it was important.”

Mary was speechless as she tried to bring order to her new world. A house like this, with these people. It seemed impossible. Life could not work out this well.

Hannah, seeing her confusion slipped her arm into hers and said, “It is simple Mary. You are family now. You and yours will live here on the ZC. Your children will grow up with mine and Rebecca’s. Unless that isn’t what you want of course.

“No, No,” Mary said, “It is just so much.”

Hannah laughed, “Come on, I will show you the rest of the house.”

Mary balked for a moment. “Will you excuse me, I need to tell Jake something.” Before they could stop her, she turned and left the house. Jake and the other two men were off to the side pointing to the mountains. She stepped down from the porch and marched up to Jake and slugged him in the shoulder.

“Don’t you ever keep secrets from me again.”

“Secrets” Jake asked as he rubbed his arm.

“Your family is perfect. And we are going to live here. And we

will grow old together loving each other until the end.”

Her man nodded with a deep frown. “Yes, isn’t that what you want.”

“Yes,” she said. “Of course. I just wished I had known how perfect everything would be or I wouldn’t have spent the last three weeks worrying.”

He laughed as he pulled her into his arms. “I am sorry, Mary Rose. It won’t happen again.”

She melted into his embrace and felt truly happy. This was her man. The one person she could rely upon above all others. They would be a team surrounded by family and face the world together.

A woman couldn’t ask for more.

The End

Author's Notes

Thank you for reading 'West Texas Rider.' The third book in the 'Parker Family Saga' series. Hannah's story can be found in **The Western Trail (The Parker Family Saga 1)** And Luke's story can be found in **Silver Creek (The Parker Family Saga 2)**

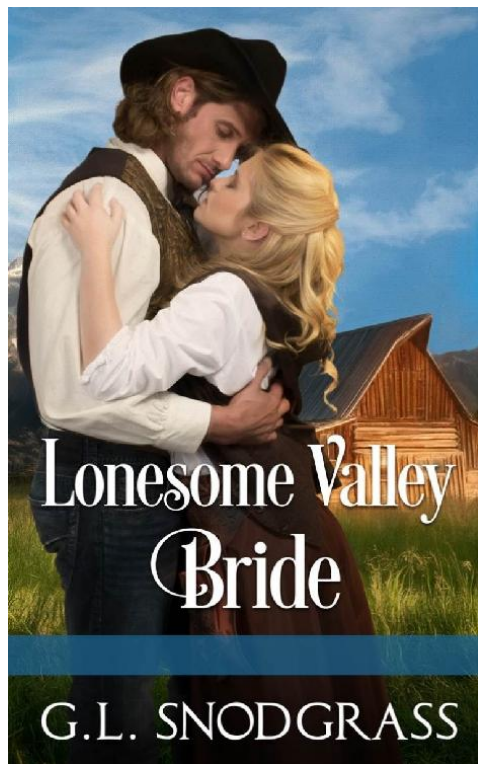
I would love to know what you think of it. My readers make it possible for me to do what I love so I am always grateful and excited to hear from you. Please stop by my website GLSnodgrass.com or send me an Email at GL@GLSnodgrass.com. Feel free to sign up for my newsletter. I use my newsletter to announce new releases and give away free books. I also post on my Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/G.L.Snodgrass/>

As always, I would like to thank my friends for their assistance with this book. Anya Monroe, Eryn Carpenter, and Kristi Rose. I couldn't have done it without them.

If you enjoyed 'West Texas Rider' please tell a friend or two. And please help out by rating this book at Amazon, Bookbub, or Goodreads. Reviews from readers make a huge difference for a writer.

I have also included the first two chapters of my book **Lonely Valley Bride (High Sierra 1)** the first book in the "High Sierra" series.

Again, thank you.



Lonesome Valley Bride

Chapter One

Jack Tanner moved the gun on his hip to a more comfortable position as he leaned forward in his saddle to peer down at the valley below. Some places are more special than others, he thought. It had to be the prettiest valley this side of East Tennessee.

At almost two miles long, about a half-mile wide, with a fast-flowing stream running down the middle. Long green grass covered the valley floor. Tall pines hugged both sides of the valley walls. The east side of the Sierra meant their winters would be milder. But enough rain and snowmelt to keep that stream running most of the year.

Some family's paradise, he realized when he saw the long finger of smoke rising from the farmhouse down close to the valley entrance. A sense of envy filled him. It looked like his life of hard roads would continue.

He sat there a moment admiring the view. "What do you think, Duke?" he said to the dog at his side. "Think they'll trade a home-cooked meal for a cord of chopped wood?" When a man spent as much time alone as he did, he just naturally talked to his dog.

"I don't know about you, but I'd cut two cords of wood for some biscuits."

The dog wagged his tail, obviously agreeing.

Jack laughed. It had been a few lean weeks. They'd both gotten tired of beans and pemmican over a week ago.

"Come on, Blue," he said to his horse as he nudged him forward. "Maybe they've got some oats they can spare."

As he broke through the tree line, he cut sign of wild mustangs. He shook his head. A good-sized herd. They probably used this valley on and off throughout the year. A man could cull enough to sell to the Army he thought as that envy feeling grew.

After crossing the creek, he spotted an old mossy horned bull watching him. A nasty scar on the bull's hip surprised him. There were few creatures brave enough to tackle such a beast. Maybe a grizzly.

"Don't worry," he called out to the bull. "We're just passing through."

The beast watched them pass, twisting to keep them under his stare.

Jack guided his horse along the creek then glanced over his shoulder at the snow-capped mountains in the distance and adjusted his thinking. "Probably year-long water," he mumbled to himself. A valuable asset on the eastern slope of the mountains.

As he approached the house, he pulled up a bit away. He had learned long ago not to surprise a man. They had a habit of acting before thinking things through. Instead, he rested a moment and observed.

A well-built log cabin, longer than most. An outbuilding. Combination barn and chicken coop. No kitchen garden though. A couple of horses in the corral connected to the barn. But no people. No wife out feeding the chickens. No rancher out checking his stock.

Adding to the mystery. The smoke rising from the chimney had slowed. Someone was letting the fire die off.

Slowly, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Something wasn't right. He couldn't place it yet, but he knew enough to go slowly.

"Helloooo the house," he called out to let them know he was there.

No answer.

Duke, panting next to him, looked up at him, silently asking if he should go in first.

Then Jack found it, the thing that had set off his alarms. A red muddy spot just a few feet from the front door. And a square drag mark from the mud back to the front door.

The unusual tint to the mud made his stomach clench up. Only blood turned dirt that color. A lot of blood. And no man butchers an animal in front of his door.

Climbing down off his horse, he tied Blue to the corral rail then told Duke to stay. The dog glanced up at him with a questioning expression, obviously not liking the idea of his friend going in alone.

Jack took a deep breath and adjust the gun on his hip. Then, thinking it through, he reached back and removed his rifle from its scabbard. A man could never have enough firepower.

As he passed the wet spot in the yard, he read the signs. A man had been shot. The large boot prints and the size of the drag mark confirmed it. He could spot the elbow marks in the dirt where the man had pulled himself along the ground.

A quick glance around told him that the boot marks were alone. Whoever had shot him had done it from a distance.

"Hello," he called.

A grunt from inside the house surprised him. He had expected with that much blood they'd be dead long ago.

"Can I come in? Do you need help?"

There was a long pause then a deep voice said, "You the one that's killed me?"

Jack had to admire the man's courage; he had always appreciated gallows humor. Heaven knew he had seen more than enough of it to last a lifetime.

"No," he said to the man inside. "If I kill a man, I do it close. You would have seen me."

The man grunted then told him to come in.

Jack used his rifle to slowly push the door open then winced. The man sat on a wooden chair. One arm resting on the table, the other hand holding his stomach together. A flash of bad memories shot through Jack. Gut shot, the man was as good as dead. No one survived that.

"Excuse me for not getting up," the man said. "It seems my legs aren't working right."

"What happened?" Jack asked as he scanned the room for hidden dangers.

The wounded man shrugged. "Stepped outside to tend the stock and some fool shot me. What does it look like?"

Jack ignored the bitterness in the man's voice. "Anything I can do for you?" he asked as he stepped closer.

"Water."

Once again, Jack winced. The battlefield doctors used to say never give a gut shot man water. It just hurried the process. But Jack figured a dying man's wish took precedent. He grabbed a tin cup off the counter and filled it from a bucket.

The man thanked him as he took the cup then sighed with contentment after a long drink.

"Thought for sure I was going to die of thirst before the bullet finished its work."

Jack nodded as he examined the man. About his own age of thirty. He was well built but short. But then, most men were short when compared to him.

"Any idea who could have done this?" he asked the man.

The man shook his head then grunted as a bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face.

"No idea."

A long awkward silence fell over them. Jack had spent too much time among the dying to push the issue. He would let the other man lead the way.

Suddenly, the man scoffed and shook his head. "I was supposed to get married tomorrow. Do you believe that?"

Jack cringed. "A jealous beau?" he asked, referring to the shooting.

"No, couldn't be," the man grunted. "I ordered her through the mail. From St Louis. Supposed to arrive tomorrow."

Jack kept quiet. He had heard that more men were doing this. It sounded too desperate in his view. But a man could make his own choices.

The wounded man closed his eyes for a moment as if trying to gather himself. "Name is Nate Parker," he said without opening his eyes. "Thought you should know so you can put it on the marker."

"I'm Jack Tanner," he answered.

The man opened one eye and studied him for a moment, his gaze flicking to the gun on Jack's hip.

"Heard of you," Nate said through gritted teeth. "Thought you were up in the Dakota territory."

Jack shrugged. "Felt like moving on. Heard there might be work hereabouts, guarding the gold shipments to San Francisco."

The man's head sunk forward to rest on his chest. It could take hours yet, Jack realized. It was a long painful way to go.

"Any particular place you want to be buried?"

"Under the oak up on the hill," the man said without opening his eyes. "I can watch over my valley from there."

"Any family I should tell?" Jack asked.

The man sighed and grunted again. "No family. But maybe you could tell my Jenny. She comes in on tomorrow's train. Tell her I'm sorry for dying on her. Her letters made me think she would make a good wife."

Jack frowned. "Do you want her to have this place?"

The wounded man laughed then coughed hard as a trickle of blood spilled from his mouth.

"A woman alone?" he said after he had regained himself. "Up here, in these mountains? Couldn't ... She couldn't survive alone."

"Maybe sell it?"

Again, the man grunted. "Why would someone pay for land? It's free from the government. Besides, it's just too far away."

Jack nodded his agreement; it was a long way off but that perhaps was one of its best points he thought. Up here in the High Lonesome, a man could become lost, perhaps learn to live with himself.

“I could leave it to you,” the man said. “But ...”

Jack’s heart lurched. Settle down here? Surprisingly, the idea appeared more tantalizing than he would have thought. Granted, a new urge to settle down had come over him the last few months. It was one of the many reasons he’d left the Dakotas.

A need to put down roots could pull at a man. Establish something lasting. Something worthwhile. And this valley, a man could build a life here.

“But?” he asked.

The wounded man took a deep breath and held it. “But,” he continued, “you’d have to marry Jenny. Seems only right.”

Jake sucked in a quick breath. There was always a catch. “Seems like a high price to pay.”

The man scoffed, “A man shouldn’t be up here all alone. In fact, I come to call this place Lonesome Valley.”

Jack didn’t know if he agreed. He’d gone his own way for so long he didn’t care for the idea of sharing his life with some unknown woman.

“I don’t know.”

The man didn’t respond for a long moment then said, “Got any paper? A pencil?”

Jack removed the small tally book he kept in his front shirt pocket and tore out a sheet of paper. He placed it and a pencil on the table next to the man.

The man grunted as he shifted in his chair. All the while, he kept his left hand on his stomach. Tacking a deep breath, he started to write. Jack reached over to hold the paper in place.

“There,” the man said as he sat back with a heavy sigh. “Show that to Judge Benson. He knows my hand.”

Jack looked down at the paper. “I don’t know. I still haven’t agreed to this.”

The man shrugged his shoulders. “If not, then sell the team and wagon and give her the money. It should be enough to get her home.”

Jack nodded. It was the least he could do for a dying man.

Later that afternoon, he used the shovel to hammer in the marker then stepped back and dipped his head for a moment.

He took a deep breath and stepped away from the grave.

“Come on Duke,” he said to his dog. “We need to go disappoint a young woman.”

Chapter Two

Miss Jennifer O'Neil glanced down at the letter in her hand and sighed. Two more hours, she thought as the train rocked back and forth. Two more hours and she would know if she had made the stupidest mistake of her life.

But then, what choice did she have? That was the thing about bad mistakes. They were usually a result of limited options.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to calm her racing heart. Really? she told herself. She should not question herself. This was for the best. Nathaniel's two letters had reassured her, and his offer of marriage had been like a rope to a drowning woman.

Tucking a stray wisp of hair back into her bun, she wondered if Nathaniel would be pleased with her. She had been told that she was attractive. In fact, that was the reason that Mr. Butler had pursued her. Of course, Mrs. Butler had not been pleased and spread ugly rumors throughout their small town.

Rumors she had been unable to knock down. It seemed there were too many wives who wanted her gone. Preferably sooner rather than later.

Nathaniel's offer had been a godsend. Even if it did mean marrying a man she had never met. But then, what woman truly knew the man she married?

Sitting back, she looked out at the brown landscape so different than the plains of East Missouri. Slowly, the scenery disappeared as she let her mind wander.

What would their life be like? she wondered. His letters made him sound rather ... normal. Not dull, she tried to reassure herself. She preferred the term 'safe.' Perhaps not as well educated as herself. But then beggars could not be choosers. She feared there would be little passion. But perhaps they could grow to care for each other. Really, wasn't that all any woman could ask for.

And, if she was particularly lucky, they would be blessed with children. The thought made her smile. Yes, that would be the life she wished for. Marriage. Children. And if she had to travel halfway across the continent to achieve it. Then so be it.

Deep down though, she pined for the loss of passion. A great love. The kind that was written about in books. That was what she secretly desired. But a poor woman without prospects had little choice.

As the train rocked back and forth. The clickity-clack lulled her to sleep. To dream of a tall strange man with wide shoulders and

dangerous eyes.

The lonesome call of the train whistle woke her from her nap. Sitting up straight, she wiped at her mouth, checked her hair, then ran her hands over her dress to make sure everything was in place. The best of her two dresses, she prayed that Nathaniel didn't notice the repaired cuff or the lace she had added to hide the frayed hem.

This was the moment, she thought as the train slowed. Her stomach churned with worry as she took a deep calming breath. Nathaniel would want a composed, sensible woman. Not some emotional ninny. No, they must start their lives together with the right impression.

Swallowing hard, she forced her racing heart to calm down. As the train slowed to a halt, she bent down to look out on the platform. All the while holding her breath. This was ridiculous. She had no idea what the man looked like. Other than his comment about being of average height. She had no clue.

Once again taking a deep breath, she handed her bag to the porter and allowed him to guide her down the steps and onto the platform. Twisting about, she scanned the area for anyone who might be Nathaniel Parker.

A tall cowboy leaned against the station, but it couldn't be him, she thought. The man was too tall. And a quick look confirmed that this man need never send for a mail-order bride. Half the single women in the state would have jumped at the chance.

Where was Nathaniel? Two cowboys were offloading a bull from the back of the train. A young couple was meeting what was obviously the woman's parents. The conductor was looking at his watch.

Jennifer's heart lurched. Was he late? Was the train early? Or, had he changed his mind? No. Surely not.

Suddenly a sick feeling filled her. Had she traveled all this way for nothing? She thought of the three dollars and twenty-two cents in her reticule and shivered. How would she survive? Suddenly, the gravity of the situation began to sink in.

The sick feeling was slowly replaced with a stomach-churning fear.

"Excuse me, Miss O'Neil?" A deep voice said from behind her.

She quickly spun around, her hopes rising only to be sorely disappointed. It was the handsome cowboy. He was even taller than she had thought.

He frowned for a moment then quickly removed his hat. Studying her, she watched as a look of confusion crossed his face. As if he were

having to rethink his reality.

“Yes?” she managed to say as she studied the man. The gun on his hip made her feel uneasy. It was uncommon where she came from. But things were different out here she reminded herself. Looking up, she continued to catalog what she saw. Tall and lean. With wide shoulders. A small scar to the side of his left eye drew her attention. How had he gotten it? she wondered.

But it was his eyes that captured her. Gray. The eyes of a wolf. A dangerous man they said. A warrior. Her stomach turned over for some unknown reason.

“Did Mr. Parker send you?” she managed to say, rather pleased with herself that her voice had not broken.

The man frowned deeply then glanced down at the hat in his hand.

“Come,” he said, taking her elbow. “Let’s talk over here.”

Her stomach clenched up as she allowed him to lead her to a bench next to the station wall. He nodded for her to sit. Her world became shaky as she smoothed her dress and sat down. Whatever had happened, it couldn’t be good. Not with that solemn look.

“I’m sorry,” he began. “But Mr. Parker was killed yesterday. On his ranch.”

Her world fell away as she gasped and brought a hand to cover her open mouth.

“What?” she exclaimed. “But ...”

He frowned and nodded, confirming her worst fear.

“Are you sure? We were to be married today.”

The tall man nodded again, obviously not enjoying telling her that her betrothed had died.

A deep numbness filled her. How had this happened? What was to become of her? Three dollars would not last long. Who could she go to for help? This was a strange town filled with rough men.

“You said, killed. What happened, Mr.?”

“Tanner, ma’am. Jack Tanner.” He paused for a moment studying her face. Then, taking a quick breath he continued, “As to what happened. I can’t rightly say. I was passing through and found him that way. Shot. He asked me to come tell you. I could see that he set you up high.”

Jenny sighed. Poor Nathaniel. His letters had made it seem as if he were so lonely. And to die that way, with only a stranger. Her heart hurt thinking about it.

The man next to her continued to frown as he studied her. She ignored him as she tried to think of some way forward.

“Can you tell me, Mr. Tanner, do you know of work for a woman in this town?”

He winced and shook his head. “To tell you the truth. An honest woman shouldn’t be left alone in this town. Too many miners and cowhands too far from home. Most will treat you with respect. But most isn’t all.”

Her heart fell. It was as she feared. But what choice did she have?

“Won’t you be going back home?” the man asked with a furrowed brow. “He said I was to sell the team and wagon and give you the money. It should fetch more than enough for a train ticket plus a little over.”

She stared at him blankly for a moment then scoffed and shook her head. “I have nothing to go back to.”

The man continued to stare at her for a long second as if trying to discover something. At last, he sighed heavily and said, “There is another option.”

Jenny pulled her mind back to the present as she gave him a questioning look. What options? There were none. She had gambled everything on Nathaniel.

Reaching into his shirt pocket, Mr. Tanner pulled out a folded piece of paper. The back smudged with a long red streak that looked like blood.

“Parker said that he would leave us his place on the condition we marry.”

“What!” she exclaimed as she pulled further away from him. He held out the paper for her. Taking a deep breath, she slowly unfolded it. It was Nathaniel’s handwriting that was instantly obvious.

I Nathaniel Parker leave my spread to Jack Tanner and Miss Jennifer O’Neil on the condition they marry before taking it on. Otherwise, the goverment can have it back.

Nate Parker

That was so Nathaniel. His misspelling of the word government was typical. But how? What did it all mean? And this man? A man she didn’t know. Why did the idea of marrying him send a fluttery feeling through her insides? As if a hundred hummingbirds had taken up

residence.

“Surely he wasn’t serious,” she mumbled, more to herself than to the man next to her.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I do believe he was very serious. A dying man doesn’t take these matters lightly.”

Jenny studied the man across from her. What kind of man was he? And why was she even thinking of going through with this?

“Tell me your thoughts on the matter, Mr. Tanner.”

He frowned for a moment then stared off into the far distance. “I admit, I had no plans of going through with his proposal. But ... I don’t know. It is a nice spread.”

Jenny winced inside. That was what it was for this man. An opportunity to gain a piece of land. Nothing more.

“And you would be willing to take on a wife for this ... spread?”

He nodded solemnly, “I think I would,” he said. Then looking at her closely he added, “For the right wife.”

Her cheeks grew warm under his gaze. She had seen that look in a great many men. That hungry look. But unlike the others, this man’s obvious desires didn’t frighten her. Instead, they lit a small fire deep down.

“And we would marry today?” she asked. “But I don’t really know what type of man you are, Mr. Tanner. It is asking a lot.”

The big cowboy nodded slowly. “Yes, Ma’am. I understand. It would be a bit much. There is not much to tell. I’m a good man with either a horse or a double jack. I’ve traveled over most of the western states and I can tell you that there is nothing prettier than Parker’s Lonesome Valley.”

She continued to frown. It had not exactly been the answer she had hoped for.

Obviously seeing her disappointment, he turned the hat in his hand then looked her directly in the eye and said, “I can promise you, Miss O’Neil, that I will never cause you harm. At least not on purpose.”

Jenny bit the inside of her lip. A more unromantic sentence had never been uttered, she thought. But really, he could not be faulted. He had tried to reassure her.

Wringing her hands in her lap, she looked up into his eyes and tried to come to a decision. Should she do this? Marry a man she didn’t know. Hadn’t that been what she had planned with Nathaniel? Was this any different?

Yet, her racing heart told her that it was different. This man was different, and she knew in the pit of her stomach that she was risking her very heart.

“Very well, Mr. Tanner. I agree to marry you.”

He didn’t smile, he simply nodded as if they had struck a business deal.

“I must warn you though,” she quickly added. “I was not raised on a farm. You will need to show me what I must know. But I am a hard worker and I learn fast.”

A new nervousness filled her. What if he changed his mind?

“Can you cook?”

She nodded quickly. That was one thing her mother had insisted she know how to do.

“Biscuits?”

Jenny frowned then nodded. “Of course.”

His shoulders slumped with relief. “In that case Miss O’Neil. I am sure we will get along nicely.”

That was it she realized. She had lost one betrothed and obtained another in a few minutes. She was to be Mrs. Jack Tanner. All because she could cook biscuits.

Lonely Valley Bride (High Sierra 1)

